

Health and Social Care Secretary speech at the CEPI Global Pandemic Preparedness Summit 2022

It's an honour to welcome you all to this Summit on behalf of the UK Government.

We gather at a time of great instability and uncertainty in the wake of a horrific act of aggression on this continent.

But we should take some inspiration from the way that so much of the world has come together to support the people of Ukraine.

Showing the same sense of common purpose and shared solidarity that was on display throughout the pandemic. The success story of Covid vaccines is just one example showing how, when we apply all our efforts and energy to a single goal barriers that once seemed insurmountable can fall away.

I remember how when the pandemic first began there were prominent voices saying that it would take a decade before we could start putting jabs in arms.

But now, just two years on, almost five billion people have had the protection of at least one Covid vaccine dose.

This has been a true global effort – for instance the Pfizer vaccine contains some 280 different components from nineteen different countries.

Thanks to this work across borders, safe and effective vaccines were developed at an incredible pace including by building on earlier work funded by the UK and CEPI to develop the vaccine for MERS.

This shows the importance of learning from previous scientific advances and the rapid progress that can be made when Governments, and industry and academia all co-operate together and work across the world.

Today, on International Women's Day I also want to take a moment to remember the contribution of incredible scientists like Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert who is here with us today, and I know that she will be addressing you later.

Professor Dame Sarah was one of the pioneers behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine 2.5 billion doses of this vaccine have been delivered across the world with most of those delivered at cost price.

CEPI has played a pivotal role in this vaccine that has protected so many people and I'm proud that the UK has been one of CEPI's biggest supporters.

Just as we've been at the forefront of the effort to vaccinate the whole world – through COVAX and I'd like to thank CEPI for the critical part that

they have played in this vital mission along with the co-leads with Gavi and the World Health Organisation.

But just because we are starting to turn the tide on this virus thanks to the protection that the vaccines have provided it does not mean that we should take our foot off the accelerator.

We still face the threat of new Covid variants that could be more severe they could be more transmissible or they could even escape the protection of current vaccines and when it comes to future pandemics – it is a question not of if but when.

Because over the coming years global travel will intensify more people will live in dense urban areas and climate change will further disrupt the already complex relationship we have with our natural environment.

We know that vaccines are the best weapon that we possess against future pandemics and that this is the moment to build on the extraordinary momentum that we have already seen.

We must keep moving at the pandemic pace and pursuing scientific solutions.

For instance, the partnership that some of you would have heard about from the Prime Minister the partnership between CEPI and one of our most pioneering companies, DIOsynVax.

It's a partnership that's working on developing a variant proof vaccine that could shield us all from future deadly COVID variants.

As well as partnerships like these, we must keep striving to secure access to vaccines across the world and shorten the vaccine development process even further – which has shrunk so much during the Covid pandemic.

This is the ethos behind the 100 Day Mission – a vital partnership looking at how we can make diagnostics, and therapeutics and vaccines more available more effective more affordable within the first 100 days of any new pandemic being identified.

Now to do this, we need to make it easier to get clinical trials up, and get them running, and delivering results and we must work more seamlessly across borders – to share data and avoid the costly duplications of effort.

Of course this won't happen on its own.

It will take the same laser-like focus that has helped us to put Covid on the back foot.

I am thrilled already by the pledges that I've just heard about from Richard, the pledges from the Government of Japan the Wellcome Trust and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support this work.

This is building on the £160 million already from the UK over the next five years.

It is not always easy to think about adversaries that don't even exist.

But if we wait until these threats materialise, then it will be too late.

So I urge other donors to step up and to fund this vital work to help us reduce the grief and devastation that future pandemics will bring.

Anyone who doubts what we are able to achieve when we put our minds to it and how vaccines can change the course of history should take a look around this museum.

You know right here in one of the world's greatest collections of scientific and medical ingenuity is the vial from the first vaccine ever given through a Covid vaccination programme this vaccine has now been put in arms of billions of people all across the world – including in a vaccination centre right here in this museum, where I got my first jab as well.

It sits alongside artefacts from campaigns against polio and the plague.

That is the magnitude of what we, we have achieved.

If we keep working together, and learn the lessons of the past two years, I have no doubt that we can do so again. Thank you all very much.