

Vaccine Deployment Minister and Mayor of London collaborate to share benefits of vaccine uptake

This week, we reached the sombre milestone of 100,000 (coronavirus) COVID-19 deaths in the UK. Every death is a tragedy and leaves behind a bereft family, but it is evident some communities have been hit harder than others.

People of black African ethnicity in England are over twice as likely to die from this virus than white people, according to the ONS. The same is also true of South Asian people.

Now, as 2 politicians from Asian immigrant families, we know the reasons for this go beyond ethnicity. It is to do with socio-economics – where and how people live – as well as historic issues of racism and inequality in this country. Those from minority ethnic groups are more likely to work in some of the lowest-paid, public-facing jobs in the country which has put them at increased risk of catching this virus.

It is also to do with history – in the past minorities have not been properly included in some medical research, including trials of vaccines. All this can damage levels of trust. However, this is not the case in the trials of today's COVID-19 vaccines which have been safely and widely tested across a range of different ages and ethnic groups. It is however incredibly important to acknowledge these lower levels of trust that some from black Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds have in the institutions set up to represent them, and we will continue to do all we can to address this.

We're incredibly pleased the UK has already started rolling out two COVID-19 vaccines which will save thousands of lives in our communities. The vaccines will eventually get us back to our normal lives, but right now it is how we will protect our communities, our friends and family, our colleagues, our elders.

Today we are calling on people from ethnic minority backgrounds to get their COVID-19 vaccine – it is safe, it is effective and it could save your life or the life of someone you love. This is an issue of vital importance and one that transcends party lines.

This week, black MPs from both the Conservative and Labour parties united against the spread of false rumours about vaccines in a video where they shared heart-breaking stories of losing loved ones to COVID-19. British Asians have put out a similar video to help dispel vaccine myths.

The NHS has been doing an incredible job, rolling out vaccinations across the country – in GP clinics, pharmacies and vaccination centres, from racecourses and leisure centres to mosques and gurdwaras. Over 7.8 million people have now received the first dose, and we have reached the incredible rate of 250

jabs a minute. But it is vital COVID-19 vaccines are available to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, faith or socio-economic background. We want everyone to get the advice and information they need to make decisions about their personal health. But make no mistake, the decision to take this vaccine could save your life and stop you ending up in hospital.

We are investing a huge amount of time and effort to strengthen the partnership between central and local government and to bring communities closer together in this effort. The government is expanding the community champions scheme so that communities have trusted local leaders who can help answer questions about the vaccine and work with the NHS and public health teams to support local communities. We are both working with faith leaders, grassroots organisations representing our diverse communities and charities and have listened to their ideas about how we can protect our communities from coronavirus and get vaccines to as many people as possible.

Some have shared concerns over what goes into the vaccines, and whether their faith permitted it. The medicines regulator, the MHRA, has confirmed there are no animal products in the vaccines and Imams have declared them to be Halal. In recent weeks we have seen the Archbishop of Canterbury receive the vaccine and Pope Francis encouraging everyone to take it.

Some have worried about how quickly the vaccine was developed. Others want to know how soon they or their loved ones would get the vaccine. We can reassure people that government is on target to offer the first dose of the vaccination to the first 4 priority groups by 15 February and all over-50s by the spring. And that it is safe. Its quick development is all down to the global effort of scientists and countries around the world.

We know people often put their trust in their friends, religious leaders, or family over the government. It is through events like these, across the country, that we are helping community and faith leaders answer whatever questions people have about the vaccines and how and when they will be invited to get a jab.

During the biggest vaccination programme in our country's history, we want to make this an opportunity to unite, and champion the work of our brilliant scientists, researchers, health and social care staff and front-line workers that have cared for our loved ones and played a pivotal part in the scientific breakthroughs that developed the vaccines.

We've asked everyone to play their part to protect the NHS, save lives, and get society up and running again, and we know the sacrifices communities have made to follow the rules.

Now the vaccines have finally given us hope, we urge everyone but especially people from black, Asian and ethnic minorities, to find trusted advice, call your GP, visit the NHS website, and encourage your family and friends to protect themselves when the call comes, it could save their life.