

Capitalism vs. science: The lessons of the 36-hour Moderna vaccine frenzy

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Monday's announcement by the Boston-based biotech company Moderna that it had positive results from the first COVID-19 vaccine test conducted on humans was greeted with a wave of media hysteria and adulation.

The evening news led with the "revolutionary" treatment, which was called a "breakthrough." NBC News declared the finding was "generating a wave of optimism." Everywhere, the line was the same, from Fox News to CNN to PBS.

A miracle cure had supposedly been found and Wall Street was beside itself. The markets surged on the news, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average rising more than 900 points. Moderna shares were up by more than \$20.

But within just 36 hours, this campaign began to collapse under its own weight.

It turned out that no one had paid attention to the fact that the information provided by Moderna was highly limited, and that the manufacturer had withheld or did not have data on the outcomes for most participants in the tiny study.

When the medical publication STAT published a report raising the most elementary scientific questions about the supposed breakthrough vaccine, Moderna shares plunged by 10 percent, dragging the Dow Jones Industrial Average down with it.

But that did not matter to Moncef Slaoui, the Moderna board member tapped by US President Donald Trump to head the government's "warp speed" vaccine development drive. Slaoui announced Friday that he would sell his stake in Moderna Monday, meaning that he became \$2.4 million richer as a result of the publicity blitz, but took none of the losses when questions emerged about the study.

In its report, STAT noted that "several vaccine experts asked by STAT concluded that, based on the information made available by the Cambridge, Mass.-based company, there's really no way to know how impressive—or not—the vaccine may be."

STAT noted that despite the involvement of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the trial, "NIAID did not put out a press release Monday and declined to provide comment on Moderna's announcement."

While 45 people received the vaccine, Moderna provided data on the results for only only eight.

Moreover, STAT wrote:

The report of neutralizing antibodies in subjects who were vaccinated comes from blood drawn two weeks after they received their second dose of vaccine. Two weeks. "That's very early. We don't know if those antibodies are durable," said Anna Durbin, a vaccine researcher at Johns Hopkins University.

In its press release, Moderna noted that the antibody levels seen in those administered the vaccine "were at or above levels generally seen in convalescent sera" from recovered patients. But STAT noted that "among 175 recovered COVID-19 patients studied, 10 had no detectable neutralizing antibodies."

Durbin noted, "I thought: Generally? What does that mean?"

STAT concluded, "Her question, for the time being, can't be answered."

Under conditions of death on a massive scale, mass unemployment and widespread social dislocation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the blatantly irresponsible promotion of the Moderna vaccine is yet another display of the unlimited level of corruption that pervades every aspect of the political establishment and media.

For Wall Street and the pharmaceutical companies, the pandemic is manna from heaven. Not only have they received a \$6 trillion bailout, but they will make billions of dollars overcharging a frightened and sick population for potentially lifesaving treatments and vaccines. For the ruling class, the development of a vaccine is not about preserving life, but determining who will win the coronavirus sweepstakes.

As with the media's promotion of hydroxychloroquine and then Gilead's Remdesivir, the promotion of Moderna's vaccine follows a familiar pattern.

The media attention surrounding Moderna's results serves to create the impression that a miracle cure is just around the corner. The aim is to bolster the ruling class's back-to-work campaign. It is intended to promote a mood that the coronavirus is not dangerous, that everything is under control and that life can "return to normal."

However, experience with vaccine trials has proven that promises in early trials are frequently fraught with setbacks in more extensive population studies. Only 10 percent of drugs that clear the first research phase will eventually make it to the market.

The Dengue vaccine manufactured in 2015 by French drug company Sanofi, for example, passed through several phases of its trial. The company was criticized for discounting early warning signs that found those who received the vaccine could develop a severe form of the disease. The condition is called an antibody-dependent enhancement, which can trigger a situation where the viral infection replication is enhanced. In 2017, the Philippines government suspended use of the vaccine amid widespread public fears and anger regarding its safety after 800,000 schoolchildren had been vaccinated.

The rapid development of drugs that were brought to markets prematurely has had catastrophic results. Thalidomide, first marketed in 1957 in West Germany, was promoted as an over-the-counter drug for the prevention of anxiety, insomnia and morning sickness. By 1961, it was recognized to cause severe congenital disabilities. Diethylstilbestrol (DES), an estrogen pill marketed in the 1940s through the 1970s for pregnant women to prevent miscarriages and avoid pregnancy problems, led to daughters born to women who used DES prone to developing a rare form of vaginal cancer.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, who is head of the NIAID at the NIH, also the White House health adviser, somberly remarked before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions that a reliable and proved vaccine would be necessary for fighting the pandemic. But he emphasized that it would take at least 12 to 18 months, despite Trump and his advisers' promise of delivering a vaccine before the end of the year.

The vaccine needs to undergo several carefully controlled trials before its efficacy and safety can be guaranteed. Millions, if not billions, of people will have to be inoculated to fight the pandemic. If the side effects of the vaccine produce morbid or lethal consequences in even a fraction of 1 percent, these numbers will run into the hundreds of thousands if not millions of people.

Beyond the mercenary and predatory interests that have been made clear in the media's hyping of Moderna's vaccine, the entire framework of the US effort to develop a COVID-19 vaccine has been dominated by nationalist geopolitical interests.

A recent article in *Science* magazine notes that the Trump administration's "warp speed" vaccine development program is based on "eschewing international cooperation—and any vaccine candidates from China," and aimed at developing vaccines "reserved for Americans."

It notes, "Although Warp Speed has not ruled out any type of vaccine, it will not consider ones made in China, such as the inactivated virus vaccine recently shown to protect monkeys from the coronavirus, a first." It adds, "Warp Speed's main

goal is to protect the United States."

In other words, the United States is determined to dominate the critical market for the COVID-19 vaccine, preempting the international collaboration that is critical to any serious response to the disease.

This week was also marked by the opening of the 73rd annual World Health Assembly, in which the United States sought to blame China for the pandemic, even as the number of infections is approaching five million and over 325,000 have succumbed to the ravages of the virus.

According to World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, "The access to COVID-19 Accelerator is uniting efforts on many fronts to ensure we have safe, effective and affordable therapeutics and vaccines in the shortest time possible. These tools provide additional hope of overcoming COVID-19, but they will not end the pandemic if we cannot ensure equitable access to them. In these extraordinary circumstances, we need to unleash the full power of science, to deliver innovations that are scalable, usable, and benefit everyone, everywhere, at the same time. Traditional market models will not deliver at the scale needed to cover the entire globe."

But these aspirations stand in stark contrast to the response of capitalist governments all over the world, which have abandoned any effort to contain the pandemic, even as they aim to position major corporations to profit from it.

The basic lesson of the frenzy over the Moderna vaccine is that the fight against COVID-19 will proceed along two fronts: the medical front and the social and political struggle against the capitalist system.

There can be no greater contribution to a search for a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic than the struggle to end private control over the pharmaceutical industry, with the aim of providing for the public welfare and not profit.



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