

Scientists and health experts call on Johnson government to help vaccinate world, as it ends all UK COVID restrictions

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More than 300 leading scientists, health experts and academics warned Friday that the policy of allowing billions of people in “low and middle-income countries” to go unvaccinated was “a reckless approach to public health”. Among the dangers was that it could lead to new variants of coronavirus emerging.

The scientists issued an open letter to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Health Secretary Sajid Javid, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, Trade Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan, and Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng. “UK at risk of new variants if poorer countries left unvaccinated”, was published on the website of the Global Justice Now charity, formerly known as the World Development Movement. Alongside the letter was a link for the public to send an email to their MP, with the message “Ask your MP to back global vaccine access”.

The call falls on deaf ears. The letter was published the day after the Johnson government ditched every COVID mitigation measure, under conditions in which the Omicron variant continues to tear throughout the population with around 100,000 new cases reported each day and hundreds of deaths. Almost a quarter of Britain’s population (16.3 million people) have already been infected, with over 176,000 people killed by COVID.

In a statement released alongside the letter, Laura Merson, Associate Director of the Infectious Diseases Data Observatory at the University of Oxford, said, “The easing of plan B restrictions may give the impression that the pandemic is coming to an end. But this won’t be over until we address the risk of new variants at the root—in populations that have not had access to vaccines. The protection provided by boosters will be tragically limited if most of the world remains unvaccinated.”

The letter was signed by 324 experts, including, in a personal capacity, 13 members of the Conservative

government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) committee and subcommittees, and an adviser to the UK’s Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. Other signatories include several advisers to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Among the letter’s backers are scientists who have long argued for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19, including Dr. Deepti Gurdasani, a public health researcher at the Queen Mary University in London, Professor Anthony Costello of University College London and Christina Pagel, Professor of Operational Researcher University College London.

The authors write of their concern “about the emergence of the Omicron variant and the threat that future variants may pose to public health, the NHS [National Health Service], and the UK’s vaccination programme.”

The letter states, “Vaccinating the vast majority of the world’s population is the best way to prevent SARS-CoV-2 from mutating. However, as the UK has provided booster doses to up to one million people every day, more than 3 billion people across the world have yet to receive their first dose. More boosters have been delivered in rich countries than the total number of all doses administered so far in poorer nations.

“Allowing huge numbers of people in low- and middle-income countries to remain unvaccinated is a reckless approach to public health that creates conditions where new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern are more likely to develop. Indeed, the Omicron variant was first identified in Botswana and South Africa, on a continent in which fewer than one in ten are fully vaccinated.”

The experts note that “we have a number of vaccines that remain highly effective against all known Covid-19 variants. Yet, unless we share this technology with the world and increase global vaccination coverage, vaccines

will not be effective at stopping new variants of concern. We must use and expand domestic vaccine manufacturing and distribution capacity within low and middle-income countries. However, intellectual property rules and trade secrets remain a major barrier to this task.”

They call on Johnson “to support the temporary waiver of intellectual property rules under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement for Covid-19 vaccines, tests, and treatments at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to scale up and diversify production of the tools needed to end this pandemic.”

The UK government should also “use all means at its disposal to pressure pharmaceutical companies to share their technology and know-how with the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Covid-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) and its mRNA technology transfer hub in South Africa.”

The letter concludes, “The crisis posed by the Omicron variant is a stark warning of the dangers posed by global vaccine inequality. The pandemic does not stop at the UK border. Ensuring global vaccination coverage will help to prevent unnecessary loss of life and avert further variants of concern from emerging, including variants that could potentially render existing vaccines less effective, or variants that confer greater transmissibility or virulence. We urge you to put public health before the commercial interests of the pharmaceutical industry to prevent another year of uncertainty and tragedy.”

The letter’s warning could not be more timely, given the spread of the BA.2 variant which, as of January 17, had been detected in at least 40 countries on every habitable continent. Predictions are that it could become the dominant variant of COVID in Britain within a month, as infections caused by it are doubling every few days.

The only priority of the Johnson government, as with the political representatives of the capitalist class the world over, is the wellbeing of the corporations, banks and super-rich. It is this agenda of profits over public health that has governed its every move since the pandemic first hit. As far back as November, Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi declared, “Ultimately our plan, we will, I hope be the first major economy to transition from pandemic to endemic.”

The media, who across the spectrum advocate varying forms of herd immunity, are fully on board and are calling for the current boosters to be the last made available, and the end of “mass testing” in order to supposedly achieve endemicity.

The Johnson government declared its opposition to patent waivers in December at the World Trade Organization, cynically stating that they would “not increase the number of vaccines reaching people’s arms”. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that instead the UK was in favour of “technology transfer and licensing agreements.” The pharmaceutical giants couldn’t have made their opposition to the C-TAP scheme any more emphatic, with Pfizer’s CEO Albert Bourla dismissing waiving intellectual property rights as “nonsense”.

“Vaccinating the vast majority of the world’s population” as called for by the scientists and health experts in the open letter, is a pipe dream under capitalism. Over 10 billion doses have been administered globally, but less than 10 percent of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose. As an example, as of January 24, in Ethiopia just 6.5 percent of the population had been partly vaccinated and 1.3 percent fully vaccinated.

The World Health Organization’s COVAX programme, set up with the remit to ensure COVID-19 vaccines reach the world’s poorest people, has missed every target it set. After nearly a year in operation, it only this month finally managed to ship its billionth vaccine dose, having aimed to deliver 2 billion by the end of 2021.

How long COVAX can even remain in operation is in doubt. Last week, the programme announced that it required an additional \$5.2 billion to support its global vaccine rollout this year. This would only cover a further 600 million doses, as well as expenses for required associated commodities including syringes.

The *Financial Times* reported, “The Covax vaccine initiative set up to ensure Covid-19 vaccines reach the world’s poorest people is unable to accept new dose donations because it has nearly exhausted the funds needed to buy crucial accessories including syringes...”

Seth Berkley, chief executive of the Gavi vaccine alliance that helped to establish COVAX said, “We are in a position where we will not be able to accept more dose donations [that come without syringes or other accessory elements] unless we get more cash.” According to the FT, “When asked how much money Covax had left, Berkley replied: ‘None’.”



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