

DISABILITY WORKERS, WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT VACCINATION...

Twelve months ago, vaccination was something which most of us took in our stride. Of course there were the range of childhood vaccinations we are all familiar with and in more recent years the 'flu vax' became a standard annual event for many Australians; certainly in our sector where it has largely been offered free by employers keen to ensure maximum uptake across their workforce.

With the advent of COVID-19 though we had a new and more pressing reason to think about vaccination; potentially lifesaving and definitely lifestyle changing. As the impact of COVID-19 started to impact our community a year ago it became increasingly and indeed excruciatingly clear that the development and rollout of a vaccine was humanity's only real chance of returning to the life we had hitherto taken very much for granted; a life of free movement and association, of going out where and when we wanted, of associating with large numbers of people...in close proximity even!! (Quelle horreur...)

Pharmaceutical companies and research institutes, backed by governments from around the world, raced to the challenge. Motivated unquestionably by profit (no surprise there) the global challenge was on. But let's be clear, other than the massive injection of public funding, this is no different to what happens every day of the year. In our privatised world the drugs which we take for granted are largely available not because of some overwhelming sense of 'public good' but because global pharmaceutical companies, which make the investment in the research, have identified that there is a (huge) potential profit available. HIV medications, cholesterol and blood pressure lowering drugs would likely never have seen the light of day were it not that they deliver a financial return to a pharmaceutical giant.

Perhaps it is the reassessment...realignment almost which a year of COVID-19 (and particularly in Melbourne 3 months of lockdown), has had on our collective psyche but it seems to me that we are oddly...obsessed almost with 'the vaccine'. I mean, have I ever wondered what is the efficacy of the Measles/Mumps/Rubella vaccine? Have I asked my GP what was the testing regime which brought it to market? No...and no. I have accepted with relative equanimity that Australia has a rigorous governance process in place and that generally speaking the common good, not to mention the individual good, is served by me partaking of what is on offer through our remarkable health system to keep me safe and well...and by extension our community safe and well.



Yet many questions and theories about the COVID-19 vaccine clog the airwaves competing for space with those whose education and experience is such that they actually do understand these complex issues. And whilst I am eternally grateful for the scientists and medical specialists who with extraordinary calm repeat their mantra of sensible advice, it does seem to me that some of the issues can be addressed with just good old common sense.



IS IT SAFE?

Both of the two vaccines which will be available in Australia, the Pfizer and the Astra Zeneca vaccines have been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Authority (TGA) following rigorous development and testing. But you know what else, Australia is a Johnny-cum-lately in this race (and maybe that's not a bad thing) because already these vaccines have been supplied to literally millions of people in many countries. If there were any significant side effects or risks surely they would have become evident by now!?

BUT CORNERS HAVE BEEN CUT IN THE RACE FOR A VACCINE?

Well actually no they have not; the same processes and safeguards were in place for the COVID-19 vaccine research and development as every other drug. The only difference being the scale of the investment which meant that some processes could be accomplished faster with shifts of researchers working literally 24 hours a day.



DOES IT WORK? IT'S ONLY X% EFFECTIVE?

We do know that none of the available vaccines are 100% effective at preventing you catching (or transmitting) COVID-19. (And again nothing different there...no vaccines are 100% effective). Still, medical experts confirm that both vaccines have an efficacy rate well in excess of 90% in preventing serious ill health and/or death as a result of COVID-19 infection. But honestly, if the best that could be offered was only 20% effective I would still have it; that has to be better than no protection. And also, does anyone ask what efficacy rate applies to the flu vax, or measles/mumps/rubella? It seems to me that the degree of focus on the development of a COVID-19 vaccine has obscured our capacity to consider the issue rationally. We have lost perspective.

When we ask our staff 'Why do you work at Bayley House?' there is one clear and consistent answer; our clients. It is rightfully with a sense of pride that our staff team, from client facing support staff to corporate services to executive team and in fact Board that the response is uniform and strong; we work here because of our connection to our clients. We value their unique contribution to our world, their resilience and humour, their capacity often to see complex issues with such clarity that it can be confronting. But we know that our clients, people with intellectual disability and many with other disabilities and/or compromising health conditions are vulnerable to COVID-19. In 2020 we shared how, in supporting our clients through lockdown we many times discovered that they were supporting us. We found their acceptance of restrictions to their lives and their preparedness to just get on with it an inspiration.

Well...our clients need us now. They need and deserve a workforce which is able to support them and not put them at risk. They need a workforce which leads by example in putting them first. It is appropriate to weigh up the evidence. It is not appropriate to give hearsay the same weight as expert opinion. Vaccination is the only real solution to the threat of COVID-19 infection and the best way for us as a community and a workforce to keep our clients safe.

Let's do it!

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