

US must lead world vaccination effort

Eric Stoner

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As someone with a serious genetic respiratory disease, I felt an overwhelming sense of joy and relief to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine this past spring. I could not have imagined that, several months later, I would be risking arrest by locking arms with others to block the entrance of the pharmaceutical giant's headquarters in New York City.

Dismayed by the growing "vaccine apartheid," as the head of the World Health Organization put it, we called on the company to relinquish its patents and share the technical know-how to manufacture the vaccine.

That would allow production to be quickly ramped up throughout the Global South, saving millions of lives.

Like most other wealthy nations, the United States is flush with vaccines – having already procured more than 1.2 billion doses, or three shots for every person. More than half of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated. But in low-income countries, only 2.3% of people have received even one dose.

Meanwhile, the same drug companies that received significant government funding for vaccine development are enjoying historic profits. This is not only morally reprehensible; it's dangerous.

New variants will continue to develop in places that lack access to vaccines, which will eventually cause another deadly wave to batter the United States and indefinitely prolong the pandemic.

If that nightmare scenario unfolds, it will be because we failed to act. The United States is fully able to end this pandemic once and for all, by becoming an "arsenal of vaccines" for the world, as President Joe Biden proclaimed.

Facing widespread protests, Biden took a belated but important first step by agreeing to back a temporary waiver for vaccine patents at the World Trade Organization in May. But the administration has not used its clout to break through the continued opposition from the European Union.

That must be a priority, as the access to medicines movement has been urging, but, in the meantime, there is much more that can and should be done.

At least 11 billion doses are needed to inoculate 70% of the global population.

In September, the White House said it will spend \$2.7 billion to scale up the production of critical components for vaccines. But that is a small fraction of the \$16 billion allocated for that purpose in the American Rescue Plan last March that has yet to be spent.



Democrats in Congress have gone further with the recent introduction of the NOVID Act, which would invest \$34 billion in the global vaccine effort and produce eight billion doses within a year, according to Public Citizen.

If the pharmaceutical industry is unwilling to move quickly, the administration should play hardball.

Alternatively, the pandemic could rightly be declared a threat to national security and public health. This would allow the Defense Production Act to be invoked to force vaccine makers to increase production and share their recipes and related technology with other companies abroad.

Waiving intellectual property rights to scale up manufacturing worldwide so that everyone can be vaccinated is not just widely popular. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restore the United States' tattered image around the globe and to save countless lives in the process.

Eric Stoner is a co-founder and editor of Waging Nonviolence and an adjunct professor at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn, New York.