

Catholic Medical Association (UK) Ethics Committee statement in relation to Covid-19 Vaccine Production, 22nd November 2020

The Catholic Medical Association (UK) supports efforts to develop an effective, safe, and widely available vaccine to combat the corona virus, SARS-CoV-2, commonly known as COVID-19 virus. Safe and effective vaccination programmes are an important part of modern, excellent healthcare provision. Humanity has benefitted greatly from such programmes in the past, with success, for example, combatting illnesses caused by the smallpox, polio, rubella and measles viruses.

In the context of a pandemic, effective and safe immunisation programmes can greatly contribute to serving the common good. While there is a great urgency to find a safe and effective vaccine to counteract the current Covid pandemic, efforts to develop, test, distribute and administer such a vaccine should follow fundamental moral and ethical principles. The most basic principle is that all human life is sacred, from conception to natural death. That must be the governing principle firmly embedded into all biomedical research.

In an effort to develop any new vaccine or other novel therapies, a number of key questions should be addressed to ensure that acceptable ethical standards are maintained,

1. Is there a grave need for this vaccine or therapy?
2. Is it safe and has the safety aspect been vigorously tested?
3. Is it very likely to be highly effective in combatting the illness targeted?
4. How was it produced and was there any element of unethical practice in the production of the vaccine (such as using tissues from aborted foetuses or discarded human embryos)? Was it necessary to produce the vaccine by such means or could a more ethical means of production have been employed? In other words, could the vaccine have been produced without using cell lines from aborted human beings, even if those abortions took place in the remote past?

In the context of attempts to develop a vaccine to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, there is little doubt that there is a grave need for such a vaccine to be produced, meeting the first of these criteria.

It would appear that a number of vaccines will shortly reach a stage of being administered to certain sections of the population. It is likely that groups perceived to be at highest risk from Covid-19 infection, and those with most benefit to gain from a safe and effective vaccine, will be the first to be offered vaccination. It is hoped and presumed that the world's pharmaceutical regulatory and licensing authorities such as the European Medicines Agency, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency in the UK, the Irish Medicines Board and the US Food and Drug Administration will have carefully examined the safety and efficacy testing programmes and records for each product before license for use in the general population is granted. If it is certain that appropriate licensing steps have

indeed taken place, then the second and third criteria mentioned above are fulfilled, with the proviso that we cannot know the possible long-term or intermediate-term efficacy or adverse effects at this stage. That is the nature of any new emergency treatment.

Legitimate ethical concerns have been expressed about a number of the vaccines currently under development to combat Covid-19. It is widely known that some vaccines have been developed using cell-lines derived from aborted foetal cells. Other vaccines have been produced without resort to using such ethically-problematic materials. It is true that the cell-lines used from aborted fetuses are derived from cells from persons deliberately aborted in the 1970s and therefore the use of these cell-lines constitutes remote cooperation with the grave injustice of abortion. From an ethical perspective, it is preferable to avoid using vaccines produced in this way if alternative, safe and effective vaccines are available that have been produced without this ethical concern.

If it materialised that the **only** safe and effective vaccines were those derived using historical cell-lines from aborted fetuses, then their use could be justified for the sake of the common good, with the understanding that continuing efforts should be made to find a safe and effective, ethical alternative. For Catholics, a helpful statement on this issue was produced by the Pontifical Academy for Life and approved by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in June 2005. Part of this statement is quoted below.*

If a safe and effective vaccine is produced and is made widely available, the question of an individual's rights and responsibilities needs to be considered. As there will always be residual concerns over longer term safety, efficacy and the ethical questions outlined above, it would be unjust to introduce policies of coercion to force any group or individual to receive a vaccine under pain of punitive measures on refusal to participate in a vaccination programme. On the other hand, individuals and groups should be made aware of their grave responsibility to protect themselves, their families and society as a whole, should a safe and effective vaccine or other treatment be made available to combat this disease.

**Excerpt from MORAL REFLECTIONS ON VACCINES PREPARED FROM CELLS DERIVED FROM ABORTED HUMAN FOETUSES [specifically in relation to vaccine against rubella infection and parental responsibilities] by The Pontifical Academy for Life with the approval of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, June 2005*

“As regards the diseases against which there are no alternative vaccines which are available and ethically acceptable, it is right to abstain from using these vaccines if it can be done without causing children, and indirectly the population as a whole, to undergo significant risks to their health. However, if the latter are exposed to considerable dangers to their health, vaccines with moral problems pertaining to them may also be used on a temporary basis. The moral reason is that the duty to avoid passive material cooperation is not obligatory if there is grave inconvenience. Moreover, we find, in such a case, a proportional reason, in order to accept the use of these vaccines in the presence of the danger of favouring the spread of the pathological agent, due to the lack of vaccination of children.”