**PRESS RELEASE**

**FNU continues panel discussions on COVID-19**

**Suva, Fiji.** The Fiji National University’s (FNU) College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS) continues to shed light on COVID-19 and its impact and vaccination through a series of virtual panel discussions.

Chaired by the CMNHS Associate Dean Research and Director of the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR), Dr Donald Wilson, the recent panelists consisted of alumna and Head of Fiji's COVID-19 Vaccine Taskforce Dr Rachel Devi and General Practitioner and a Professor in the Department of General Practice and Primary Care and Medical Director of the Immunisation Advisory Centre (IMAC), at the University of Auckland, Professor Nikky Turner.

The panel discussion on Friday, June 25, 2021 was conducted via Zoom and live-streamed on the FNU and CMNHS Facebook pages.

Panelists spoke in their areas of expertise and answered questions from members of the public that were sent through a dedicated email address: covidquestionsfnu@gmail.com and messaged during the Livestream session.

Below are highlights of the key issues discussed.

**Why was there a need to develop more than one vaccine for the same disease?**

Professor Turner mentioned that it is not unusual to have more than one vaccine for COVID-19. She explained there was an urgency in the world to have a vaccine that would be effective. She added that this led to several different approaches and all the vaccines work slightly different. Some of the vaccines were not effective and did not work. Moreover, having different kinds of vaccines for the same disease, enabled countries to choose the kind of vaccines they would need. The University of Auckland based Professor Turner further stated that it is vital to use vaccines that are verified as effective by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and has a good safety profile.

**What message do you have for people who do not trust the World Health Organisation (WHO)?**

While emphasising the vital role played by the World Health Organisation, Professor Turner said there is a need for reputable, peer-reviewed scientific advice which is unbiased. She mentioned that the WHO accumulates scientific knowledge which is accurately peer-reviewed by scientists.

**Why did Fiji choose the AstraZeneca vaccine?**

Head of Fiji's COVID-19 Vaccine Taskforce Dr Rachel Devi clarified that while Fiji was preparing for deployment plans last year, it became part of the COVEX facility, which is the hub of all the vaccines approved by the WHO. Additionally, developing countries were offered allocations and Fiji received the AstraZeneca vaccines. Dr Devi enlightened that based on the situation around the globe, the only focus was to get people vaccinated. Due to its efficacy and availability, Fiji accepted the AstraZeneca vaccine.
Dr Devi also shared that AstraZeneca has a lot more manufacturing plants across the globe than any other form of the vaccine. She indicated that AstraZeneca fits well into Fiji’s culture and system.

**How do we ensure that the AstraZeneca vaccine is completely safe for human use?**

While reiterating the effectiveness of the AstraZeneca vaccine, Professor Turner reiterated that it is important to realise that the AstraZeneca vaccines are developed in the same way as other vaccines. She explained that the vaccines were developed with standard and quality care ensuring that all steps were followed during the manufacturing phase. She further mentioned that developing the COVID-19 vaccines is a historical step stating that the world has shown what it can do to effectively battle the pandemic.

**What else can you tell about the AstraZeneca vaccine, in terms of its efficacy and effectiveness and the side effects?**

According to Professor Turner, the AstraZeneca vaccine has carefully worked up through all the clinical trials and the vaccine got emergency licensure in many countries. She elaborated that at least two-thirds of people will be protected once they are fully vaccinated with two doses. She also added that the vaccine is highly effective for the elderly generation who are at high risk of getting COVID-19.

Dr Devi explained that there are no vaccines that do not have any side effects. She said while not everyone will experience side effects, it is normal to have a mild fever.

**Is COVID infection real? Is there really a virus behind this infection?**

Professor Turner clarified that if there were no virus, there would have been no vaccine. She said the scientists are identifying the different variants of the virus.

**Can people still get COVID-19 infection after they have been vaccinated?**

Professor Turner repeated that every individual’s immune system is slightly different from another. She said the majority of people will have a good response to the vaccine and do not get sick but there will be a small percentage of people who can be vaccinated and still become unwell after being vaccinated.
She further mentioned that there is a certain percentage of people who will be fully vaccinated and once exposed to the virus, they might have mild sickness however majority won’t get sick at all.
She said if a person is fully vaccinated, there is a 50% chance that they will not spread it to their family members. Professor Turner highlighted that people should understand that when they are getting vaccinated they are protecting themselves and their families as well.

**Since we are not vaccinating the children, how do we calculate the numbers of what becomes the target for the people to get vaccinated?**

According to Dr Devi, the target population is 18 years and above. Overall, she said 586,615 target populations in Fiji need to be vaccinated. She further stated that once the vaccines are available for children and there is credible data on the safety aspect, then the Ministry of Health and Medical Services will explore vaccinating that population as well.

**Kindly update us on the vaccination program in Fiji?**

In Fiji, 38,031 individuals are fully vaccinated which makes about 6.5% of Fiji’s targeted population being fully vaccinated. Dr Devi expressed that for maximum protection, people need to take the second dose as well. She revealed that the side effects from the second dose are very less as compared to the first dose. She mentioned that 46% of the Fijian population have received that first dose. With the Delta variant, we have seen some good results even at eight weeks, mentioned Dr Devi while encouraging Fijians to take the second dose within the given period.

**Can a person who has had COVID, get infected again?**

Responding to the question on whether a person can get infected with COVID-19 twice, Dr Devi while the vaccine is an important option, it might not be the only thing that can be done to prevent the virus from spreading. She said it is essential for people to follow COVID behaviours.

**About the panellists**

**Professor Nikky Turner**

Professor Turner is an academic General Practitioner. She is a Professor in the Department of General Practice and Primary Care and Medical Director of the Immunisation Advisory Centre (IMAC), at the University of Auckland. She has developed and evolved IMAC from its inception in 1996 into a national communication, coordination, education and research centre. She works part-time as a General Practitioner at the NUHS Broadway clinic in Strathmore, Wellington

Professor Turner’s academic interests are in immunisation, primary health care and preventive child health. She represents the RNZCGP (College of General Practitioners) in child health interests and is a health spokesperson for the Child Poverty Action Group. She was a member of the World Health Organization Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) on Immunization and Chair of the Measles and Rubella elimination subcommittee from 2016 to 2020. She is on a range of national committees supporting the NZ immunisation programme and the COVID vaccination delivery. In 2021 this includes chair of the National Verification Committee for measles and rubella elimination; a member of the Pharmac PITAG immunisation subcommittee; a member of the Ministry Technical Advisory Committee (TAG) and Immunisation Implementation Advisory Committee (IIAG) for COVID vaccination and a member of the Strategic COVID-19 Public Health Advisory Group to the Government.

**Dr Rachel Devi**

Dr Devi is a public health physician who is currently Fiji’s National Advisor for Family Health, and the national co-ordinator for the current COVID-19 vaccination programme. She is passionate to see the vaccination programme succeed, and hopes to address the common questions around the vaccination programme in Fiji.