

'WE ARE HOPING CORBEVAX COULD BE VAX FOR THE WORLD'

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MUMBAI : Corbevax, the covid vaccine of the Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, and Hyderabad-based Biological E Ltd, is drawing attention for being a model for the global vaccination campaign, by forgoing intellectual property rights for therapies used in pandemics. In an exclusive interview with *Mint*, Peter Hotez and Maria Bottezi, the developers of the vaccine, which has been designed in the US and made in India, share their plans to increase manufacturing capabilities for the vaccine for India and for global use, which could potentially end vaccine inequity. Edited excerpts:

India has fully vaccinated 40% of its population, do you still think your vaccine has a role to play in India? Do you see Corbevax as a potential booster shot?

Hotez: We see this as a standalone vaccine, booster vaccine, and paediatric vaccine. As a standalone vaccine, we see potential as only 40% of 1.2 billion people have been fully vaccinated and thus you still have a long way to go. We are hoping that this could be the vaccine for the world as Bio E said it has the capacity to manufacture up to 1.2 billion doses. This could be a booster for the AstraZeneca vaccine, too. There is a trial coming up for the paediatric vaccine as this vaccine uses the same technology that is used to manufacture the Hepatitis B vaccine, which is being given to children all over the world for decades. So there will be a lot of indications for this.

You have given up the patent rights for the vaccine. Should other vaccine developers follow this model?

Bottezi: That is how our vaccine centre has been created. We hadn't received attention before the covid-19 pandemic, but we have been developing vaccines for neglected diseases and this is the model we follow. Of course, we were never successful as there was never really an urgency or ability to showcase this as a case model. With Bio E, it shows that this model can work. You have to recognize that the company is amazing as it wants to eventually use the vaccine to support others. Our vaccine was never exclusive. We hope that during emergency situations or programmes categorized as market failure this is an alternative model.

How many vaccine doses is Bio E ready with for deployment?

Hotez: Our understanding is that it is ready with 100 million doses, and it is manufacturing 100 million doses with a target of 1.2 billion doses in 2022. Bio E has an advanced purchase agreement of 300 million doses with the Indian government, so that is pretty exciting.

How long will the World Health Organisation (WHO) approval of Corbevax take?

Bottezi: We had a call with WHO officials. It is high on their radar screen. We will soon see them packaging the information. WHO has been in the loop since the beginning. So it would accelerate emergency listing. Besides WHO, we are looking at other approvals such as in Australia and the UK to accelerate.

Does your vaccine work against the Omicron strain?

Hotez: So far the vaccine is holding up well against variants, including Delta, with the neutralizing antibodies lasting long. We don't have the data yet, but so far it looks promising that the vaccine will hold up against Omicron, particularly after people are fully immunized.

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Hotez: Our vaccine, which has the same technology as the Hepatitis B vaccine, can be co-formulated with the Hepatitis B vaccine to give to infants, or to combine with another paediatric vaccine. We have to look at all options. But that is going to be the future of vaccination where you minimize shots and maximize their ability to give results.

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