

Not a believer

by MIKE BAKER

Is anyone else even slightly worried by the news that the Russians are fast-tracking a supposed vaccine for COVID-19?

It's now been a little more than a week since Russian President Vladimir Putin declared victory in the global race to develop a vaccine that, he says, offers immunity against the coronavirus. With the whole world still reeling from the months-long pandemic, you'd think such a momentous occasion would be lauded and celebrated by scientists and health experts across the globe.

Instead, the silence has been deafening. And for good reason.

In announcing Sputnik V, named after the first space satellite launched by the Soviet Union in 1957, Putin claimed the vaccine is safe and has been extensively tested, pointing out that one of his own daughters had been inoculated and displayed positive results. While that may speak to his confidence in the vaccine, health specialists across the globe remain skeptical.

The World Health Organization has already stated Sputnik V needs to undergo a rigorous safety review before it will even consider endorsing the vaccine. Well duh. The vaccine, developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute with assistance from the Russian Defence ministry, is being rushed to the market, far too soon. According to a story published by CBC on Aug. 11, it was estimated that Sputnik V had been tested on just 76 people by the time of the announcement.

The Russians say that Sputnik V has successfully come through the first and second phase of testing. In those two stages, the vaccine is administered to a small amount of people, which gives credence to the claims it may have been administered to less than 100 people before last week.

The first and second phase of clinical trials were completed in less than two months, with a third phase, which can typically take up to a year to complete, beginning last Wednesday, according to Russian officials. During this phase, the vaccine is given to thousands of people and tested for efficacy and safety.

Dr. Zain Chagla, an infection disease specialist at St. Josephs' Health Centre in Hamilton, told CBC that the reason vaccines are required to be tested on such a wide scale is because many side-effects only show up in a small percentage of the population.

?It's very dangerous to scale this up to an entire population without doing those trials,? Dr. Chagla said.

Again, well duh. This is a sentiment that has been shared by specialists from a wide variety of organizations and national health agencies. If you're going to roll out a vaccine for something, you better damn well make sure that a) it does what you say it does, and b) it doesn't come hand-in-hand with any other dangerous or deadly reactions. I'm sorry, but I find it difficult to believe that, in just six months, the Russians can be absolutely, 100 percent confident in the quality of this vaccine.

The WHO has already gone on record to say that there is no 'silver bullet' for COVID-19, essentially meaning there is no one size fits all solution, or cure. There are currently more than 150 vaccines under development worldwide, including Sputnik V, with 26 of those in the process of conducting human trials.

It should be noted that developing, testing and reviewing any potential vaccine is a long and arduous process that almost always takes years to complete. Even then, there is a constant need to study data after the fact. The mumps vaccine, considered to be the fastest ever approved, took four years to go from collecting viral samples to licensing a drug back in 1967. Yes, science and technology have come on leaps and bounds since then, but it's pretty telling that it's been half a century and no other vaccine has beaten that four-year from start to finish record.

It would appear that Russia intends to move forward with Sputnik V whether the greater health community likes it or not. And there does appear to be a market for it. Over 20 countries have expressed their interest in the vaccine, according to Kirill Dmitriev, head of Russia's Direct Investment Fund, the main investor behind the vaccine's development. He says there are preliminary applications to secure over one billion doses of the vaccine, while he claims Russia has signed agreements with five unnamed countries to produce a total of 500 million doses a year.

It is rumoured the vaccine will be mass produced in Brazil or India, or possibly both. The first batch of vaccine doses, made in Russia, will be ready in around two weeks. Those doses will be administered to doctors, teachers and other frontline workers who wish to take it.

While I'm sure we're all sick of hearing it, the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the way it has swept across the globe. All have fallen in its wake. There is a desperate need for us all to get back on our feet, but launching ourselves body first into a largely untested vaccine simply isn't the way to do it.

I certainly won't be standing in line any time soon to receive my shot of Sputnik, even if by some miracle it does find its way on Canadian shores any time soon.