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At the time of writing, there have been over 240 million cases of COVID-19 reported to WHO, with almost 5 million people worldwide having died from the infection. For many, 2020 was a hellish year, filled with governmental restrictions and lockdowns, increasing panic about the rising death toll, and limited opportunities to see loved ones in safe environments. Yet, despite the fact that multiple vaccines have now been created, some people are still hesitant to get the jab. In a chance encounter while on holiday, Catherine Green met someone who held this belief. “We don’t know what they put in these vaccines”, said the woman in a rainy English campsite. “I don’t trust them, they don’t tell us the truth.” However, Green did know precisely what was in the vaccine. As part of the team that designed and created the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, she was able to explain to this woman the exact make up of the vaccine, the history behind its creation, and attempt to persuade the camper of the limited risks by comparison to the high pay-off of possible immunity. Yet, this was just one individual convinced. For more people to take the vaccine something more drastic needed to be done. Thus, Catherine Green and her colleague Sarah Gilbert decided to write a book, and Vaxxers was born.

Written in a loosely chronological order, Gilbert and Green take turns to write alternative diary chapters, narrating their lives from the first time they became aware of the disease (Jan 1, 2020) to the successful vaccine rollout in spring 2021. On the surface, vaccine hesitancy appears to be caused by public distrust. Some people are nervous about what is in the vaccine, how it got approved so rapidly, and the long term health implications. To them, there is something odd about giving an essentially healthy person a cure for an infection that has not happened yet. In Vaxxers, Green and Gilbert hold the readers’ hand and walk them through not only the events of the previous year and a half, but the in depth science behind the vaccine’s creation—how it came about, how it is replicated and made, and exactly what goes into it. They also walk the reader through the different logistical, political, and economical hurdles that they had to face on this journey, and explain how this vaccine as created relatively rapidly in the scheme of the scientific world. All of this scientific information is dotted with anecdotes and personal memories of the highs and lows of their year, which has inevitably changed their lives. The aim of this book is simple: both Green and Gilbert want to reassure the reader that the vaccine they both helped create is both effective and safe. They are not “big pharma”, some faceless corporation with ulterior motives. They are human beings—mothers, colleagues, women who above all just wanted to help save lives—and they succeeded.

The scientific explanations within the book cannot be faulted, as they are put beautifully but simply for the layman reader. Above all, the authors wanted to make this book accessible. Overwhelmingly, however, there is a sense of increasing frustration from both Gilbert and Green and rightly so. From early on, both authors have had to defend the science behind their vaccine, and it has seemed as though the press has been particularly brutal in their reporting on the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine when compared with alternatives. Part of this can be explained as misinterpretation of early data, but this excuse for ignorance can only be used so far. When efficacy results came out via press release in November 2020, Gilbert remembers the many fruitless battles that she had in the trying to convince people that 70% efficacy was in fact a positive result for a vaccine trial. This uphill battle continued, and despite further positive results in February “carefully worded statements to the media, explaining the science behind the vaccine would disappear... with incorrect statements repeatedly cited as a fact”. When use of the vaccine was suspended in several European countries because of fears of possible side-effects, the motivations behind this coverage appeared to be political rather than scientific or logical.

Gilbert raises the point that the media seemed determined to portray the AstraZeneca vaccine as a rival to the alternative vaccines, while in reality she argues that they were allies, fighting a global battle against the disease that killed millions. Instead of bemoaning different types of vaccines that were being created, as a scientist Gilbert celebrated them. In truth, “the only competition was between the virus and human ingenuity”.

“What none of us foresaw was how the vaccine would become a political football”, Gilbert states, as negative press came from both Europe and the USA. It is understandable that after having given so much of their blood, sweat, and tears to the development of this vaccine, it was hard to take this criticism lightly. Because of the widespread misinformation, both authors felt the need to write this book as a mean to convince those who had been barraged by negative reporting that the vaccine does in fact work in a safe and reasonable manner. It is difficult to predict how many vaccine hesitant people the authors will actually be able to convince, but they can at least feel vindicated that they have eloquently defended their case. Vaxxers is overall a gripping read, and provides a human face to what was a monumental scientific achievement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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