Managing through the Covid second wave: Public affairs and the challenge of Covid vaccination

As we are about to publish this first issue of the Journal Public Affairs (JPA) in 2021, we do so against the backdrop of the still rising second wave of coronavirus infection in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world. According to WHO figures, at time of writing, there were just over 94 million cases of coronavirus recorded globally with just over 2 million deaths. The major concern worldwide has been the emergence of new more virulent strains of the coronavirus that have contributed to a very serious second wave of infections in many countries. Indeed, it was reported recently that coronavirus has accounted for the highest total of daily deaths in the United Kingdom since the Second World War (100,000). The chief concern in the United Kingdom (and similarly elsewhere) is that the Public Health Services (National Health Service in the United Kingdom) faces the real threat that it could be overwhelmed by the number of Covid-related admissions to hospital, which have reached a critical stage in many regions with a new coronavirus patient being admitted to hospital every 30 s. As a consequence, a further national lockdown has been imposed across the United Kingdom to try to stem the rising tide of infection while a national vaccination programme is being rolled out on a tiered basis starting with the most vulnerable groups of care home residents, caring staff and NHS workers. Indeed, the target of vaccinating all people in vulnerable groups by mid-February may well be on the cards with the NHS delivering over 1.5 million doses of vaccine a day. Similar lockdowns, curfews and border closures are increasingly evident around the world as internationally and at a state and regional level, we grapple with controlling the pandemic.

Indeed, coronavirus vaccine strategy adopted arguably has become a critically important public affairs issue for government around the world. Here, the key issue is the credibility and perceived competence of the government’s strategies for securing sufficient vaccines, managing the vaccine’s distribution and convincing some sceptical anti-vaccination groups to recognise the vaccines’ safety and efficacy.

In the United Kingdom, the government’s crucial decision has been to prioritise administering the first doses of the vaccine to reach out to a more significant proportion of the population before topping up individual’s immunity with a second dose. This calculated risk and rollout has been widely explained and promoted using public healthcare and NHS experts to endorse the policy and encourage positive debate in the media.

In the United States, African American and Hispanics/Latin Americans have disproportionately lost their jobs in the Covid recession, but they are also more likely to perform the kinds of labour deemed essential, which accounts, in part, for the higher infection, hospitalisation and death rates found among these populations. What is difficult to understand fully is that even though African-Americans are more likely than white Americans to be infected with – and die from – the virus; recent surveys have found that only around 42% of African-Americans have expressed a willingness to receive the vaccine. Indeed, the inauguration of the new Biden Presidency was marked with the sombre recognition that over 25 million cases of Covid had been reported and deaths from the virus had reached over 400,000 in the United States again more than had died during the Second World War. The new President made the immediate commitment to tackle the pandemic more aggressively. This will involve addressing the confusion and resistance to wearing face masks by some sections of the population and boosting vaccination roll-out and take-up across the population.

The challenges and controversies surrounding the strategies adopted by governments to tackle the coronavirus pandemic in the United Kingdom and the United States, have been echoed in many other countries, albeit with different issues coming to the fore. For example, in Spain, the government has declared that coronavirus vaccination is voluntary but has put in place measures to record those refusing to have the vaccination on the individuals’ health records. The Spanish government has come under considerable fire over its policies as infection numbers have trebled, and hospital admissions doubled. The government has eschewed calls for an even tighter lockdown, ‘gambling’ that the second coronavirus wave is peaking and looking to vaccination to help bring down the infection rates.

In Italy, particular controversy has surrounded the Health Minister of the Lombardy region’s suggestion that areas with stronger economies should receive priority for vaccinations. Reacting to the outcry this statement generated, the Minister argued that this was not about giving more vaccines to richer regions, but by helping regions such as Lombardy recover, it would automatically help the country’s recovery as a whole. Whatever the merits of such an argument, inevitably it has been portrayed as allowing privileged, wealthier areas to ‘buy’ access to vaccines ahead of less wealth area/populations. Because Lombardy is the most populous region of Italy, it has accounted for almost a third of Italy’s coronavirus deaths (over 82,000). It already has received the largest share of vaccine doses. The suggested refocusing of Italy’s vaccine strategy highlighted the importance of how any such policy is communicated and ‘sold’ to the public.

Because of the worldwide demand for coronavirus vaccine, inevitably the question of securing adequate supply and then distribution...
of the various vaccines has become a priority issue for governments around the world. Inevitably the issue of cost and ‘buying’ access to quantities of the vaccine has reared its head in terms of whether richer countries can or should be allowed to ‘flex their financial muscle’ and acquire greater access to vaccines at the expense of poorer nations. Equally, ‘vaccine queue jumping’ has emerged with some regions and possibly some organisations seeking to gain priority access to vaccines. In Austria, for example, an investigation has been launched into vaccine ‘queue-jumping’ with several Mayors under investigation. There has also been an accusation of some care homes that were all given priority access to vaccines offering jobs to care home staff relatives. In one extreme case, a care home has been accused of offering jobs in exchange for donations. In Poland there has been strong accusations of queue jumping and priority being taken by politicians. The supply and quality of vaccines across Europe has become deeply political, with the EU attempting to control supply to its member states and gain priority. Whilst the availability, cost and effectiveness of different vaccines is regular news item and under increasing scrutiny. The Oxford-Astra Zeneca developed vaccine seems to have factored in availability at cost for the whole world into its thinking very early on and it is hoped that others will do the same.

And of course, these concerns over vaccine supply and distribution focus primarily on the health and well-being of individual nations and the world’s population; but the corollary of this health-focused issue is the crippling impact of coronavirus on national economies and the world economy, with some industries such as hospitality, travel and retailing suffering devastating losses with many well-known companies closing for good. It is here that public affairs arguably can and should come to the fore serving that fundamental tripartite interface between government, business and citizens, ensuring all relevant voices are heard and listened to and helping government convey and explain what at times might be quite unpalatable messages in the short term about difficult decisions designed to serve the greatest good in the longer term. It is the lesson for public affairs thinking and practice that emerge from such difficult, and indeed unprecedented circumstance that we aim to capture and disseminate in JPA. Sadly, the virus seems to hit the poor and vulnerable the most and we should factor this into our duty of care and policy making. Societies with good systematic public government and accountability seem to be doing well in the pandemic, let us hope these lessons can be learned.

Turning to the content of this first issue of the new year, we have a diverse and intriguing mix of papers that reflect the widening reader base of the journal. A growing number of articles are from Africa and India and show the breadth of cultural thinking and ideas being shared to strengthen communication and economic regulation. We cover such diverse issues and topics in public affairs as Banking, the Betting industry (remember China’s Gambling industry is the largest in the world above the United States), Carbon Emissions, Corporate Social Responsibility, Deprivation, Education, Government Regulation, Female Employment Nuclear Industry, Political Campaigning, Public Policy Making, Social Media Communication, and Sustainability.

We are always looking for high quality Public Affairs Management papers for the journal and would remind potential authors that the JPA focuses on themes such as government relations and lobbying, issues management, community relations and lobbying, corporate social responsibility and political strategy and marketing. Specifically, JPA provides industry case studies about major private and public sector organisations, applied research from leading research, critical insights about issues facing the public affairs professional and practitioner articles about the challenges, latest thinking, techniques and practice of public affairs.

In essence, JPA provides an essential resource for those who need to stay in tune with the ever-evolving discipline of public affairs and international policy making and regulation. It has ‘built one of the largest international collections of expert knowledge on a wide range of relevant themes including: government relations and lobbying, issues management, community relations, corporate social responsibility and political strategy and marketing’ (JPA, 2020).

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