



EMCOZ
EMPLOYERS
CONFEDERATION
OF ZIMBABWE



Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination: August 2021

Theme" Towards a safe work place"

At one time or the other we all had a feeling of some kind of anxiety about receiving any new vaccine and that is understandable. Initially, the whole world became awash with conspiracy theories around COVID-19. Today, our understanding is that, while the COVID-19 vaccines were created and approved more quickly than the average vaccines, safety and testing precautions were not sacrificed to achieve effective results because development was facilitated by extensive prior research, unprecedented levels of international collaboration among researchers, and massive public investment in Research & Development and manufacturing capacity; and approval processes were accelerated, in part through procedures that allow the acceptance of more preliminary evidence in circumstances of public emergency; and with COVID-19 products accorded the highest priority by regulators.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a global health emergency and an unprecedented economic crisis. In addition to the loss of life and productivity directly attributable to COVID-19, the pandemic poses risks to human capital through several other pathways, key among which is the disruption in the provision of essential primary health, education, and community services. COVID-19 is a highly infectious and, in some cases, highly dangerous disease. Some populations, including the elderly and persons with underlying medical conditions are at greater risk for severe symptoms and even death. Natural immunity combined with vaccine-induced immunity has been scientifically proven to be the most effective means of safeguarding against COVID-19. The emergence of new, more transmissible variants such as the Delta variant has led to further large-scale lockdowns and redoubles the urgency of vaccination.

With more people becoming eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, some employees may be wondering why they should get vaccinated. While the rapid development of vaccines against COVID-19 is an extraordinary achievement, successfully vaccinating the global population presents many challenges, from production to distribution, deployment, and importantly, acceptance. Trust in the vaccines is vital, and is critically dependant on the ability of employers to communicate the benefits of vaccination, and to deliver the vaccines safely and effectively. The main benefits of getting vaccinated against COVID-19 are as follows:

- The vaccine reduces your risk of infection: Once you receive your first shot, your body begins producing antibodies to the

coronavirus. These antibodies help your immune system fight the virus if you happen to be exposed, so it reduces your chance of getting the disease. It is true that you can still become infected after being vaccinated, but once more of the population is vaccinated, those chances are further reduced. So, getting vaccinated not only reduces your chance of being infected, it also contributes to community protection, reducing the likelihood of virus transmission;

- The vaccine can help your unborn baby or new-born: Results from recent studies indicate that expectant mothers who receive the COVID-19 vaccine create antibodies to the virus and pass those to their unborn baby through the placenta. Mothers were also shown to pass antibodies to their new-borns through breast milk. This suggests those new-borns have some immunity to the virus, which is especially important as young children cannot get the vaccine;
- The vaccine protects against severe illness: Studies also show that the vaccines currently in use are effective at preventing severe illness from COVID-19. So even if you were vaccinated and become infected, you are very unlikely to become severely ill. The vaccines are also effective against the new variants we are beginning to see circulate, such as the Delta variant. Studies have shown that vaccinated people who do get infected have mild to moderate cases of COVID-19 compared to those who are not vaccinated. Therefore, your risk of hospitalization and death because of COVID-19 is nearly eliminated once you are fully vaccinated;
- The vaccine will help us ditch the mask: The vaccine could be the final step in our effort to get back to a more normal way of life. Evidence suggests that vaccinated people who might be infected with the coronavirus have fewer virus particles in their nose and mouth and are less likely to spread it to others. This finding is important as getting vaccinated now not only protects you, but also limits spreading the virus to loved ones and friends. As more people continue to receive the vaccine, we will finally reach herd immunity, which means the spread of the virus becomes unlikely. It is important we all receive the vaccine to help us achieve this public health goal;
- Another benefit to getting vaccinated is that fully vaccinated people can travel without quarantining, both domestically and internationally.

However, a mind-boggling question that is lingering in the minds of employees is whether employers can lawfully introduce a “no job, no job” policy. The starting point is that no one can be compelled to be vaccinated. Section 35 of the Public Health Act of Zimbabwe provides that no health service shall be provided to a person without their informed consent. Consent to treatment in this regard entails that a person must give his or her permission before they receive any type of medical treatment, test or examination. This implies the COVID-19 vaccine is not mandatory, and it would be illegal to force somebody to be vaccinated. However, section 86(2) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe allows for the limitation of fundamental rights and freedoms, if the limitation is necessary in the interests of public health. Therefore, it is understandable to argue that the requirement to be vaccinated is a reasonable management instruction and a refusal to comply with that instruction may be a disciplinary matter. Employers have a general duty to ensure, as far as is reasonably feasible, the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees.

EMCOZ is of the view that public trust in COVID 19 vaccines and vaccination is actually as essential as the effectiveness of the vaccines themselves. Strong confidence in the vaccines within workplaces leads to more people getting vaccinated, which leads to fewer COVID-19 illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths. Moreover, the experience with COVID 19 will likely shape confidence in other vaccines making it even more important to build confidence at this time. We, as employers, believe that the most important ingredient in all vaccines is trust. Trust in vaccination, and in the ability of employers to communicate, and to successfully deliver a vaccination programme is critical. Public trust in vaccination is very important and it is the view of EMCOZ that people should not feel forced into vaccination. This is particularly important as not everyone can be vaccinated or chooses to be vaccinated – for example people with certain medical conditions are not vaccinated, pregnant women may chose not to be vaccinated and other groups may be less likely to be vaccinated. Therefore, instead of a mandatory vaccination policy, EMCOZ believes that the starting point should be to support and encourage employees to be vaccinated by:

- Providing clear communication establishing the rationale for why companies would like all staff to take advantage of the vaccination programme, i.e. to protect themselves, their colleagues and members of the public;

- Signposting staff to public health guidance, medical advice or counselling through an employee assistance programme;
- Being as flexible as possible when it comes to staff getting the vaccine, which could include giving paid time off work for employees to attend their vaccination appointment;
- Offering flexible, non-punitive sick leave options (such as paid sick leave) for employees experiencing side effects after vaccination;
- Using campaign resources to run an awareness campaign at your workplace and provide employees with access to reliable and accurate information about the vaccine, especially its safety and effectiveness;
- Sharing the Question & Answer document and expert advice videos to explain the vaccine and answer common questions employees may have;
- Urging staff to be cautious of misinformation and encourage them to use trusted sources such as the Ministry of Health and Child Care and the WHO if they are searching for information or answers to questions about the vaccines;
- Creating employee advocates by encouraging staff to discuss their vaccine experiences and share accurate information with colleagues, family and friends;
- Allowing time for vaccine confidence to grow. Workers who are hesitant at first may become more confident after seeing co-workers get vaccinated. Employers with an on-site clinic should offer more than one opportunity for vaccination. Mobile clinics should also return to a worksite multiple times on a rotating schedule;
- Ensuring credibility - for various reasons, many people are distrustful of COVID-19 vaccinations (or even vaccinations in general). Therefore, linking vaccination efforts to established and existing organizational well-being programs can add credibility that helps overcome resistance and gain vaccination buy-in;
- Encouraging leaders in your workplace to be vaccine champions, and talk with others about COVID-19 vaccines.

Adopting a supportive and not a coercive approach to the vaccination programme may achieve a high proportion of employees voluntarily being inoculated.

However, it is important to note that the availability of vaccines does not decrease the need for safety measures to help beat the COVID-19 pandemic. Even after inoculation, EMCOZ encourages you all to:

- Practice good personal hygiene, including frequent handwashing;
- Wear a face mask in public;
- Practice social distancing;
- Avoid prolonged contact with crowds, indoors or out.

We need to work together as social partners and continue to take an integrated approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. No one is safe from COVID-19 until everyone is safe. Let us not forget that the ultimate defeat of COVID-19 requires every tool available: vaccination, natural immunity, and effective public health measures.

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