

# Teachers qualify for Covid-19 vaccines, but do they want it?

The roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine for teachers is currently underway, with the Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga setting a goal to vaccinate 582,000 staff at public and private schools - including support workers and those who work in the Education Department offices - before 8 July.



Source: Supplied

With 48,000 teachers vaccinated on Day 1 according to a media statement, the rollout appears to be moving along smoothly – but the road ahead may be bumpy.

Founder of professional learning community Zibuza.net, Malcolm Mooi, explains: “We were pleased to hear that teachers are being prioritised for vaccination. However, we are concerned that some teachers may be misinformed about the side effects of the vaccine, and that this misinformation may lead some to opt-out of the jab.”

To get a better sense of the scale of this anti-vaccine sentiment, the Zibuza.net team circulated a short survey to a sample size group of educators. The one-question poll was anonymous to ensure honest answers and asked teachers to respond ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘maybe’ to the question of whether or not they would get the vaccine once they were eligible.

## Vaccine willingness survey results

- 70% of respondents answered 'Yes'
- 20% of respondents answered 'No'
- 10% of respondents answered 'Maybe'

“We were unsurprised by the results of the survey,” says Mooi. “While we knew that many teachers were in favour of the vaccine for its ability to reduce the likelihood of severe illness or death after contracting Covid-19, we anticipated that not everyone would be on board - this has been the case in other sectors and in other countries.”

“Zibuza.net is first and foremost an advocate for the wishes of teachers and we respect their right to make their own decisions, but we are concerned that without widespread vaccination, schools will not be able to return to normal operations and our learners risk falling even further behind,” he adds.

Mooi’s concerns were echoed by Motshekga who called on all teachers to “get vaccinated in order to stabilise schooling and save the sector.”

## **Reasons for reluctance**

Much of the uncertainty surrounding the vaccines stems from concerns around purported side effects of getting the jab, rather than its efficacy.

“Many of the teachers that I have spoken to who do not want the vaccine have shared that while they do believe that Covid-19 is a serious threat and that vaccines do work in helping to stop the spread, they are afraid of side effects and do not want to take the chance,” explains Mooi.

Mooi says that the additional reasons teachers he has spoken to have given for not wanting the jab include:

- “Not enough time spent on testing before the vaccines were approved.”
- “I’m pregnant and I don’t know how this might affect my baby.”
- “It goes against my religious beliefs.”

While these concerns are valid, conspiracy theories and ‘fake news’ have played a dangerous role in exaggerating the likelihood of rare side effects such as blood clots occurring and helped to spread misinformation and fear.

## **Teachers need to protect themselves**

Mooi’s desire to stop the spread of vaccination misinformation stems from his hopes that widespread vaccination will bring an end to the devastation that the pandemic has had on the sector.

“Too many educators have died – more than 1,100 according to the DBE - as a result of this virus and vaccination remains the most effective way that they can protect themselves,” says Mooi. “While it is still possible to contract Covid-19 after being vaccinated, it greatly reduces the risk of severe illness or death.”

While teachers have the choice of whether they wish to be vaccinated, they do not have the same freedom in choosing whether to return to in-person schooling.

According to statements from Motshekga, all teachers will need to return to school by mid-July, regardless of whether they have been vaccinated, including teachers with co-morbidities who had been working from home for safety reasons.

“For the sake of both the learners who have been deeply disadvantaged by the last year’s disruptions and for their own safety, I deeply hope that teachers will heed the call to protect themselves and get vaccinated before the 8 July cut-off,” Mooi concludes.

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