



The COVID-19 vaccine profit controversy

Description

Is it morally ethical and acceptable for pharmaceuticals to earn excessive profits on COVID vaccines?

By Irwin Rapoport

After three waves that traversed the globe between 1918 and 1921, the **Spanish Flu** virus suddenly disappeared. It literally went extinct. During its lifetime, researchers estimate that it killed between 20 and 100 million people and infected approximately 500 million people – about one-quarter of the two billion people on Earth at the time of the outbreak.

This was a horrendous and terrible period for many people with the pandemic starting a few months before World War I ended – which killed millions of people, be it at the front lines, through starvation (especially Germany due to the Allied blockade), and the displacement of millions of refugees – as well as civil wars and bloody revolutions that occurred immediately after the war.

It was a bleak period in which many experienced death, destruction, and misery firsthand. It is hard to imagine many people today having the stamina and fortitude to go through those experiences. And of course, one can only imagine how the people of Europe made it through the **Black Death** (Bubonic Plague) for four years with the daily fear of death and seeing family and friends drop like flies.

We have COVID deniers today and they had Spanish Flu deniers and anti-mask rallies back then. People and governments were debating many of the same issues we are today.

What was not available at the time of the Spanish Flu was a vaccine, let alone the four we have today to deal with **COVID-19**. Many of the basic measures being taken today – wearing masks while taking public transportation, trains, and indoors in public spaces, social distancing, curfews, and the shutting down of schools, cinemas, theatres, restaurants, sports venues, etc. – are reminiscent of measures taken then, as are the errors and mistake.



We have COVID deniers today and they had Spanish Flu deniers and anti-mask rallies back then. People and governments were debating many of the same issues we are today. This [link](#) concerning **Los Angeles and its Spanish Flu experience** is enlightening and extremely informative.

I also invite you to read the Wikipedia page for the [Spanish Flu](#), which serves as an excellent primer on the pandemic and to read [The Great Influenza](#) by **John M. Barry**, which is a brilliant history of the Spanish Flu. This book, which I incidentally purchased at a Westmount Friends of the Library book sale, was crucial in helping the American federal government develop its policy for dealing with pandemics. Notes the Wikipedia page for the book: "In the summer of 2005, **President George W. Bush** read the book while on vacation at his ranch in Crawford. His study would later set forth plans for the federal government to prepare for future pandemics in a November 2005 speech."



Third-world vaccination delivery – Image: courtesy of the World Health Organization (WHO)

As noted, there was no vaccine for the Spanish Flu although heroic attempts were made to find one and to develop cures. Today, many people in First World nations are being vaccinated and that is helping to establish local herd immunity. This is positive news but has led to many questioning whether it is morally ethical for pharmaceutical companies to manufacture the vaccines to make a profit on the life-saving vaccine.

No one would deny that the pharmaceuticals have incurred costs in developing and testing their vaccines and the manufacturing process, but to what extent should they profit from this pandemic? We know that Israel, to ensure that its people were vaccinated, decided to pay a higher price to secure its allotment. This has raised moral and ethical questions of jumping the queue at the expense of others and the morality of pharmaceuticals agreeing to such transactions.



Were the pharmaceuticals to earn a profit of one or two percent per vaccine, many would accept this while others would argue that the development and manufacturing of the vaccines are actions vital to the survival of humanity and that no profit should be earned. In fact, many are now calling for the vaccine formulas to be public, setting aside the copyrights so that governments could manufacture them rapidly and vaccinate most of the 7.5 billion people on Earth rapidly to establish a worldwide herd immunity and prevent the development of further **COVID variants**.

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Some fear that if we do not act quickly, the vaccines will not resist the growing number of variants. A concern for others is that COVID may mutate into an entirely new virus if it has time to infect millions of people unchecked. This is why many medical authorities are keen for people to receive their second vaccine 30 days after the first. At this point, Quebec is giving the second dose to people four months later due to the limited supply of vaccines and a desire to inject as many people as possible with a first round.

Many media reports have noted how governments have not only provided money for research to the pharmaceuticals but guarantee that they would purchase hundreds of millions of doses. This line of argument stresses that the pharmaceuticals did not experience any financial and legal risks in developing their vaccines and thus have an obligation to minimize any profit they might earn

Moreover, there is a school of thought which argues that pharmaceuticals could easily rehabilitate their public image by selling their vaccines at cost, saying with one voice, "we are doing this for the sake of humanity." Should they decide to follow this course of action, it could inspire other companies to unite on vital issues affecting the planet, such as global warming and protecting the ecosystem that supports all life on our planet. I can easily imagine governments, companies, various NGOs, and millions of individuals banding together to protect whole ecosystems and their biodiversity. When we protect the Amazon River Basin, we protect a system that generates vast amounts of oxygen daily. Sadly, the Amazon rainforest is being destroyed before our eyes with forests being logged and burned to create arable land and via dams to generate electricity.



Administration of the COVID vaccine in the third-world – Image: courtesy of the World Health Organization (WHO)

And in terms of HIV, the need to act rapidly was accepted and the drugs that make up the cocktail of daily medications used by those infected to stay alive were made available at a very low and affordable cost to many nations in Africa and Asia to help save lives. In sub-Saharan Africa, HIV and AIDS were wreaking havoc, taking the lives of many and creating millions of orphans. Desperate action was required and it occurred. It was a shining example of our “better angels” triumphing for the common good.

Back to vaccines. We already have experienced the eradication of Smallpox in the wild via the vaccination of everyone on the planet. Today, smallpox only exists in the lab. Interestingly, when scientists and government authorities debated whether to destroy the remaining samples or retain them, it was learned that the Russian military had weaponized its country’s samples as part of a bacterial warfare program.

Benjamin Franklin, after he developed his version of the lightning rod, did not patent it. He was well aware of humanity’s need to be protected from this natural phenomenon. **Dr. Jonas Salk**, who invented the polio vaccine, which ended the disease’s threat as a potential pandemic, also refused to patent his vaccine. When asked by legendary CBS broadcaster **Edward R. Murrow** “Who owns the patent on this vaccine?” Salk replied, “Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?”



We are at a crossroads, especially with growing calls by the public for governments to make available their contracts with the pharmaceuticals. This is certainly the case for Canadians who are daily asking for the documentation to be released. When made public, the documents will shed serious light on the issue and add fuel to the fire. Unlike other first-world nations, Canada does not have the facilities to manufacture the vaccines domestically.

‘... COVID... is a clear and present danger and if we can resolve it in the spirit of “one for all and all for one,” it could lead to positive systemic changes on many fronts.’

Excessive profits already earned by the pharmaceuticals can easily be diverted for research on “orphan drugs” and to subsidize the expensive prices charged to governments and individuals for these life-saving medications. Additionally, the pharmaceuticals can, henceforth, publicize the formulas for their COVID vaccines and the manufacturing process to ensure safe doses are created at facilities in many countries. This could even lead to a “New Deal” between the pharmaceuticals and the public.

No one wants to stifle medical research and the development of drugs to tackle diseases and various conditions but COVID, as they say, is a clear and present danger and if we can resolve it in the spirit of “one for all and all for one,” it could lead to positive systemic changes on many fronts.

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Irwin Rapoport is a freelance journalist and former school commissioner with the Protestant School

Board of Greater Montreal (1990-1994). He is currently a candidate in Ward 3 for the English Montreal School Board elections.

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