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**Press Conference**  
**Office of the Prime Minister**  
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, members of the press, and welcome to an update from the National COVID-19 Vaccine Consultative Committee on the steps being taken to prepare for the distribution and administration of the COVID-19 vaccine in The Bahamas.

I am accompanied today by the Chief Medical Officer Dr. Pearl McMillian, Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr. Delon Brennen, Dr. Gina Archer, Assistant Hospital Administrator and Mr. Ed Fields, deputy chairman of the Consultative Committee.

Yesterday, The Bahamas recorded 16 new confirmed cases of COVID-19. Of that number, 13 were recorded on New Providence, 5 were imported. One on Grand Bahama, Eleuthera and Andros respectively.

I am very pleased to note that a number of Family Islands have gone many weeks without recording a single confirmed case of COVID-19.

Following a challenging second wave this past summer, the current case numbers and hospitalizations show the transmission of COVID-19 throughout the country remains relatively low.

We continue to monitor the daily incident cases, hospitalizations and COVID related deaths.

The progress that we've seen to date is due in large part to the sacrifices made by Bahamians and residents across The Bahamas and the significant contributions from the public and private sectors throughout the pandemic.

But the pandemic is not over.

Worldwide, more than 100 million cases of COVID-19 have been recorded.

There have been more than 2 million deaths.

Mutant strains have been identified from the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil.

There are growing concerns about the mutant strains of the virus.

At this time, we are not conducting genomic surveillance or gene sequencing of the coronavirus on site; however, health officials are closely monitoring viral patterns that we are seeing in The Bahamas, especially among travel-related/imported cases of COVID-19.

New strains emerge when there is a lot of disease. These new strains can cause re-infection. The new strains of the COVID-19 virus replicate more and in turn cause more disease and death.

We must therefore continue heightened surveillance, which is test, isolate and treat.

We must continue to practice the COVID-19 prevention guidelines.

Wear your mask.

Keep a distance of at least six feet from others.

Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently.

Avoid large gatherings.

Stay at home if you feel unwell.

These practices have contributed to our current positive position, when compared to other jurisdictions.

Getting vaccinated is another way that we can protect ourselves and others from COVID-19 and the new strains.

It is a known fact that vaccines save millions of lives each year. They work by preparing the body's immune system to recognize and fight off viruses and bacteria.

The Government of The Bahamas will only accept COVID-19 vaccines that are pre-qualified for use by the World Health Organization (WHO) and approved by stringent regulatory authorities.

Where vaccines have been used there have been decreased hospitalizations and deaths.

A dedicated team comprised of national, regional and global scientists are following published reports and scientific press releases on the administration of vaccines.

Reports suggest that the virus is sensitive to the vaccines that have received WHO pre-qualification and emergency use authorization.

To date, three COVID-19 vaccines have received authorizations for emergency use.

- Pfizer/BioNTech;
- Moderna; and
- AstraZeneca/Oxford

Emergency use authorization provides a pathway to fast-track products intended for use during a public health emergency. Emergency use is only authorized for the duration of the declaration of the emergency.

Vaccines approved for The Bahamas must be certified through the pre-qualification process and must have Emergency Use Listing (EU and UK); FDA, Emergency Use Authorization (US); or Stringent Regulatory Authority/Caribbean Regulatory System (Caribbean).

In The Bahamas, the Ministry of Health serves as the Regulatory Authority for assessment and importation of vaccines at the national level.

A team reviews all vaccine offers and makes recommendations to the consultative committee.

Vaccines must come directly from the manufacturer with accompanying scientific materials.

The Pre-Qualification process includes monitoring of the vaccine manufacturing practices, and expert scientific group reviews as a part of determining whether the vaccine is safe for use.

Following the pre-qualification, vaccine manufacturers must apply to an internationally recognized authority, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the US, and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the UK, for emergency use authorization.

The Emergency use pathway in no way compromises the safety and certification process for the development of the vaccine.

The COVID- 19 vaccine is not here yet, but as announced earlier this week, The Bahamas has been formally notified that it could receive 100,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine, starting the second half of February through the second quarter of 2021, through the COVAX Facility.

The Government also continues to work on all fronts to secure additional approved COVID-19 vaccines.

The Bahamas has the capacity to store the expected 100,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine at the appropriate



temperature at a secure site. Fallback facilities have also been identified within the private sector.

The AstraZeneca vaccine is a viral vector vaccine and is administered in two doses.

What does that mean? It means that the virus has been genetically altered, so that the virus behaves like the COVID-19 virus but does not cause the disease.

Pfizer and Moderna use genetic material for vaccine development.

This is one of the reasons why the development of the COVID-19 vaccines was faster than normal.

Another contributor to the faster than normal timeline is the unprecedented number of financial and operational resources put behind the development of the COVID-19 vaccine, including testing in representative populations.

This research is ongoing.

The AstraZeneca vaccine is recommended for use in 18 to 65-year-olds. However today, February 4, the European Medicines Agency has authorized COVID-19 Vaccine, Astra Zeneca in people from 18 years of age – including those 65 and above. More data are continually becoming available for this older age group.

It is estimated that persons 65 and older make up 7.4% our population.

The distribution and administration of the COVID-19 vaccine in The Bahamas will be a great operational challenge and perhaps the most difficult that the public health sector has ever faced.

The Bahamas has demonstrated a strategy to eliminate congenital rubella using a mass immunization campaign in 1998. We are fortunate that persons who worked on that team are assisting with the rollout of the COVID-19 Vaccine.

The distribution plan is in the process of being finalized. It is anticipated that all aspects of the plan will be tested before going live to ensure the safe and effective distribution of the vaccine.

Training modules are in development to cover vaccine pre-registration, vaccinators, electronic documentation, monitoring for adverse events and management of medical waste.

The vaccines will be administered at accessible locations in communities throughout The Bahamas to increase access to all Bahamians and residents and ensure equitable distribution of vaccines to those who choose to take it.

There will be a focus on high-risk populations where COVID-19 has occurred.

Three priority groups have been proposed. Group 1 will consist of health care workers, uniformed branches and elder care providers.

Group 2 will include persons with disabilities, persons living in congregate settings, critical workers in high risk setting, other essential service workers, persons with comorbidities and underlying conditions and sea, air and ground personnel.

Group 3 will include all others not previously identified.

Special provisions will also be made for those with disabilities and identified priority groups.

All approved vaccine sites must be accessible, safe and appropriate for the distribution of the vaccine.

In addition to public health providers, there is a proposal to engage private practitioners to help administer the COVID-19 vaccine.

There will be four steps to complete the vaccination process:

1. Registration
2. Vaccination

### 3. Monitoring of adverse effects

### 4. Certification

Pre-registration for the vaccine will be available online and at registration centers across The Bahamas once sites have been finalized.

The rollout of the vaccine will be carried out in three phases across The Bahamas.

It is anticipated that the complete rollout will be carried out over a six-week period.

The proposed sequence is as followed:

During weeks 1 to 4, vaccines will be administered on the islands of New Providence, Grand Bahama and Bimini.

During weeks 2 to 5, vaccines will be administered on Abaco, the Abaco Cays and Exuma.

During weeks 4-6 vaccines will be administered on Andros, the Berry Islands and Eleuthera.

The remainder of the Family Islands will also be covered during this period.

At the outset, healthcare workers at public health facilities, vaccinators and frontline workers will be targeted early in the vaccine administration process.

On islands with small populations, health teams will immunize all eligible residents. These islands will not follow the prioritized group rollout. Local teams will be supported by mobile teams from New Providence.

We are also working with a wide network of Rotary Clubs, ALIV and other corporate groups.

Islands will be prioritized based on the profiles of case distribution and transmission of infection.

Vaccines will be transported by air to the Family Islands in portable coolers.

It is anticipated that anyone receiving a vaccine will receive a COVID-19 vaccination certificate after completing

the vaccine process. In the case of a two-dose vaccine, certificates will be received following the second dose.

The presentation of the certificate may be associated with travel in the future. This is a potential requirement that continues to be discussed internationally.

We want to protect as many people as we can, however we must recognize that there are those who should not get the vaccine.

This is based on what we are learning from the published literature about the vaccine and the administration of more than 100 million doses worldwide.

Extra precautions must be taken to determine if there are significant allergies or if the immune system is compromised to the point that significantly reduces the effect of the vaccine.

This is the reason why we must protect those who cannot receive the vaccine. Getting the vaccine protects not only you but those around you.

COVID-19 vaccines will be available free of charge to eligible adults and will not be mandatory.

The vaccine has not yet been approved for use in children, however, more data is expected to be available in the Spring.

The Ministry of Health and the Consultative Committee will continue to provide regular updates and information on COVID-19 and the vaccine, including our efforts to deliver a safe and effective vaccine.

The public is encouraged to use the Ministry of Health and Office of the Prime Minister's social media platforms and websites, and credible news and information sources to keep up to date and properly informed on the COVID-19 vaccine.

A national vaccinations public education program will soon be officially launched by the Ministry of Health. In support of the program, information will also be available at [www.opm.gov.bs/covid-19-vaccines/](http://www.opm.gov.bs/covid-19-vaccines/)



We will now take questions from the media and answer questions submitted by the public.