



House of Assembly Communication

**The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis
Prime Minister and Minister of Finance**

Wednesday, 21 April 2021

Mr. Speaker:

The Government of The Bahamas has continued to carefully monitor the health data on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yesterday, Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis, Special Health Advisor to the Prime Minister and Chair National COVID-19 Vaccine Consultative Committee, and other medical officials, gave a press conference and presentation on the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic in The Bahamas.

Dr. Dahl-Regis is one of the leading experts in the Americas in her field.

She is internationally-recognized for her many decades of service and work in public health.

The Bahamas is most fortunate to have her expertise and guidance.

The Government and the Bahamian people are pleased to have her wise counsel.

I commend her remarks and the data she offered to the nation.

It is most unfortunate that some individuals seem not to understand or appreciate the medical science and data.

It is quite possible that after yesterday's press conference that some may once again publicly ask for the very science and data that the medical officials just put out in detail, including through various slides and graphs.

Some individuals have the odd habit of asking "where's the science" right after the medical experts present the science to the whole country.

Throughout the pandemic we have carried the briefings on the science by the medical team on TV and via social media.

The data on cases is sent out daily.

The data and information are made public for all to see.

Mr. Speaker:

I wish to recall a number of critical areas from yesterday's presentation.

Dr. Dahl-Regis noted that: "We are in a race against time [and that] the pandemic is not over.

"COVID-19 is continuously presenting new challenges. At this time vaccinations alone will not get us out of this pandemic.

"We must simultaneously address the increase in cases, the identification of resistant strains and adherence to the public health measures if we are to win this race and return to a sense of normalcy."

Dr. Dahl-Regis further noted:

"As we seek to increase access to the COVID-19 vaccine and the number of vaccinations administered, we have also been

observing an increase in some numbers on a daily basis, over the last two weeks.

“New infections are being driven by international travel **and** a relaxed adherence to the health measures.

“The emergence of variant strains of COVID-19 is of significant concern. New strains have been identified from the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Africa, and most recently from India.

“These variants spread more easily and are infecting younger age groups. The cases may be more severe.”

Mr. Speaker:

Our region of the Americas is having particular difficulty.

An active emergency exists in South America with numerous countries battling extreme conditions.

There are surges in the Caribbean, and increased cases and hospitalizations in parts of North America.

Beyond the Americas, in Europe numerous countries are still under heavy restrictions.

Some are battling variant-driven upswings that began months ago.

New surges are also occurring in some parts of Southeast Asia.

The broad global uptick and increase in cases is affecting The Bahamas.

Analysis is underway to give us more information as to their role in our current circumstance.

Mr. Speaker:

Dr. Dahl-Regis reported: “We have been actively monitoring genomic testing from the 13th of March to the 17th of April.

“The results, as reported by the National Reference Lab, are showing evidence of an increasing number of genomic deletions. This is indicative of variant strains.”

She noted that: “We must return to heightened surveillance and contact tracing if we are going to win this race in the shortest period of time [and that] we have to accelerate the uptake in vaccines.

“To help control the surge in new cases, we must test, isolate, trace, treat and vaccinate. All cases and contacts of cases must be identified to bring the spread of COVID-19 under control.

“As part of the contact tracing process, private lab reporting requirements are also being enforced to ensure that information reaches health officials in a complete accurate timely manner.

“At the same time, we are moving to accelerate the vaccination program throughout The Bahamas.”

Mr. Speaker:

I met with representatives of the testing laboratories yesterday morning.

I reminded them of the requirement to submit COVID-19 test results to the Ministry of Health's surveillance team.

I also reminded them of the fine for not submitting the test results as required. The fine is \$20,000.

The requirement to submit data will be tightened for the RT PCR test results being submitted within 24 hours.

There will be stiffer penalties for failure to abide by this requirement.

This is a part of our heightened surveillance strategy to combat the increase in cases.

Mr. Speaker:

I also note that the enforcement of Emergency Orders will also be increased and enhanced.

Members of the public are asked to please comply.

I am asking business that are able to do so to have their employees work from home where possible to decrease the spread of COVID- 19.

I note that this is a voluntary request.

Mr. Speaker

I wish to note a number of additional measures we are taking.

Effective immediately, the daily curfew for mainland Abaco will be moved to 10 p.m. – 5 a.m.

Travelers within The Bahamas who have been fully vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus will be exempted from COVID-19 test requirements that are currently in place when

traveling from New Providence, Grand Bahama, Abaco, Exuma and Eleuthera.

These travelers will be exempted immediately after full vaccination.

Proof of full vaccination will be required.

Effective 1st May, those travelling to The Bahamas from outside of the country will be exempted from a COVID-19 test if they are fully vaccinated and have passed the two-week immunity period.

Proof of full vaccination will be required.

To be clear if an individual is not fully vaccinated that individual will still be required to provide a negative COVID-19 test where testing requirements are in place.

Mr. Speaker:

My Government has been working day and night to get vaccines to The Bahamas.

Thus far, we have received 20,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine as a gift from the Government of India, along with 33,600 from the COVAX Facility.

The Pan-American Health Organization has informed The Bahamas that we will receive the second tranche of AstraZeneca vaccines through the COVAX Facility before the end of May.

This tranche will consist of 33,000 doses.

That leaves a remaining 34,200 doses to be received through the COVAX Facility.

Thus far we have administered approximately 22,000 doses of the vaccine.

Vaccines have been administered on the islands of New Providence, Grand Bahama, Eleuthera and Abaco.

Dr. Dahl-Regis yesterday set out the COVID-19 Vaccine Consultative Committee's schedule for the expansion of vaccinations across our island-chain.

Health and logistics teams were deployed yesterday to start reconnaissance visits in preparation for the start of vaccinations on the islands during the week of April 26th.

Health teams will be supported by local government officials, health administrators and community leaders.

The teams will prepare vaccination sites, secure necessary supplies and conduct training for the online platform.

As Dr. Dahl-Regis added, this is ambitious but we hope it will be completed essentially over a several-day period.

In our Family Islands, the vaccine will be administered to all residents 18 years and older with a Bahamas Government-issued ID.

The proposed schedule announced yesterday is as follows:

- **Monday, April 26:** Andros, Mayaguana, Inagua, Crooked Island, Acklins, Long Cay, North, Central and South Andros, Ragged Island and mainland Exuma;
- **Tuesday, April 27:** Berry Islands (Great Harbour Cay), Cat Island, San Salvador and Long Island, Exuma Cays and Rum Cay;
- **Wednesday, April 28:** North, Central and South Eleuthera; and
- **Friday, April 30:** Bimini.

The location of vaccination sites and the days and times for each island will be published on opm.gov.bs.

That information will be widely circulated via other platforms.

The Family Island locations will have online and on-site appointments.

We encourage Family Island residents to make their appointments online at: <https://vax.gov.bs>.

Those who need help should ask a family member or friend for assistance.

Vaccinations are key to us getting out of the pandemic.

In order to get back to normal, in order for our economy to fully open up, we need each Bahamian and resident to come forward to be vaccinated when eligible.

Vaccines will help to prevent more sickness and deaths.

We need our people to come forward quickly.

Israel is the world leader in vaccinations.

Their good work has led to a remarkable drop in cases.

Their country is now responsibly and gradually opening up.

If we get a large number of Bahamians vaccinated, we too could put the emergency phase of the pandemic behind us.

I ask Bahamians to get their vaccination when it is their time, and to encourage friends and family to do the same!

Once the Family Islands are completed, our full resources will be concentrated on New Providence.

Mr. Speaker:

The measures I announced are only part of our necessary collective response.

We are one Bahamian team in this fight.

To address the increase in cases, we need every Bahamian and resident to fully practice all the public health measures.

Throughout this pandemic my Government and I have crafted policy with our public health experts.

We have worked to save lives and livelihoods.

We only tighten restrictions via the emergency powers when it is necessary.

When conditions improve, we loosen the measures.

If we did not have the emergency powers there would be chaos and more sickness and more deaths.

Those who oppose the emergency orders have taken a historically reckless position.

In addressing this pandemic, we also use an island-by-island approach.

For example, measures needed in New Providence may not be needed on Crooked Island or Mayaguana or Long Island.

We do not like imposing restrictions.

We know the pandemic has had a great impact on people's finances and mental health.

We only do so when they are necessary and only for the time required.

Mr. Speaker:

As was also noted at yesterday's press conference:

“Ministry of Health officials and the Consultative Committee will continue to provide regular updates on the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine.

“We encourage the public to use the Ministry of Health's and Office of the Prime Minister's official websites and social media platforms, and credible news sources to keep up to date and properly informed about the COVID-19 vaccine.”

Mr. Speaker:

As I end my Communication, I wish to offer the advice and words of Dr. Dahl-Regis, who stressed:

“We are making progress.

“But our work is far from over.

“To help slow the spread of COVID-19 we must redouble our efforts.

“This is no time to relax. We must continue to practice the public health measures.

“Avoid large gatherings.

“Abide by the Emergency Orders.

“Wear your mask properly - over your nose and your mouth.

“Keep a distance of six feet from others when you are out.

“Wash or sanitize your hands regularly.

“And when you are eligible, get vaccinated!

“The sooner we get vaccinated, the sooner we can fully open our economy. The sooner we get vaccinated, the sooner we can get back to work.

Mr. Speaker:

These times require perseverance.

These times require making decisions based on what is required to protect our people.

We are trained as doctors to tell our patients the truth as well as to offer hope.

This is what has guided me for 40 years as a doctor and what has guided me during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a medical doctor I have continued to monitor the health data and the science.

As prime minister, I continue to utilize such vital data in my Government's decision-making process.

As I have said before, let us continue to do our part to defeat this pandemic.

In this spirit, may I invite those who wish to volunteer to help in the vaccination program to do so.

You may sign up to volunteer at: covax@bahamas.gov.bs.

Let me repeat: covax@bahamas.gov.bs.

Mr. Speaker:

May God continue to bless and guide our Bahamas.

Thank you and good morning.
