

Dr. Delgado COVID-19 Update 01-13-21

Vaccine Update

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar threw a new wrench into the works on Tuesday, telling states to expand priority access to tens of millions of additional people immediately.

The new prioritization scheme pushes everyone 65 and older, as well as people 16 and older with one high-risk medical condition, to the front of the vaccine line, where they join health workers and nursing home residents and staff. Whether individual states follow suit will add another layer of intrigue.

States, still lacking sufficient federal funding and coping with limited supplies, have struggled to complete the vaccination of people in Phase 1a, which includes health workers plus the residents and staff of long-term care facilities — a population of about 24 million people. To date, only 9 million people in this group have received their first dose.

But it will be several months, at minimum, before there is enough vaccine available to meet that kind of demand. The move all but ensures the current narrative around the

vaccine rollout — it's too slow — will shift, but not in a positive direction.

Previously, the second tier in the prioritization schedule endorsed by the ACIP envisioned frontline essential workers and adults 75 and older being included in the second phase of the vaccine rollout. There are an estimated 49 million people in those two groups, a more manageable figure in a time of vaccine scarcity.

This new directive adds approximately 150 million people — that's 300 million doses — at the front of the vaccine line. This just does not jibe with Operation Warp Speed which currently estimates that will be until the end of March before it has 200 million doses to allocate. Many suggest these estimates are overly optimistic and even if they prove to be prescient, will only cover 2/3 of those in this expanded cohort. This would mean that 50 million people over 65 would not be able to obtain their first dose until April or May. Think about that for a second. No immunity for some in this group until at least June of this year.

A smoker in his 20's would now have the same vaccine priority status as a 85-year-old and would be ahead of many frontline workers the CDC had previously recommended — bus drivers, non-smoking teachers, food processing employees — be vaccinated in Phase 1b. Is

leaving them behind prudent?

Add to that, Johnson & Johnson announced just today that due to manufacturing delays of its vaccine candidate, the firm will not be able to meet its initial and promised production schedule which was due in February for at least 2 or more months. Keep in mind, whether its clinical studies, which are projected to be completed in several weeks, show comparable efficacy and safety to the other vaccines and are subsequently approved by the FDA after their review remains uncertain and could lead to further delays.

I still have concerns about these projections of availability in the future and subsequently basing any decisions to ramp up a rollout on what are essentially guesses. It's a potential recipe for disaster. Every projected goal or date to this point has been erroneous and it has not even been close.

My apparent pessimism is solely to provide a perspective that is accounting for all the moving parts that this venture entails. Even if the expanded access comes to fruition, all of you will not be able to get vaccinated the first day of its availability. It's just not possible. Continued patience and tempering of your anxiety will be required.

More to follow.....

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