

October 20, 2021

How Good Are the Vaccines?

Retired General Colin Powell died this past week of COVID-19. He had been fully vaccinated, but he had multiple myeloma (suppressing the body's immune response) and Parkinson's Disease. *Yahoo News* wrote:

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [almost 190 million](#) people in the United States have been fully vaccinated against the coronavirus. Of those people, 1,074 under the age of 65 [have died](#) from COVID-19. There have been 6,104 COVID-19 deaths of people 65 or older who had been vaccinated. Among the breakthrough coronavirus deaths tracked by the CDC were 951 people who did not show symptoms of COVID-19 and appear to have died from another cause. (<https://news.yahoo.com/colin-powells-death-doesnt-challenge-efficacy-of-coronavirus-vaccines-173102331.html>)

Without going into detail, your blogger qualified for a booster dose of the Pfizer, and he took it. Immune responses are necessary, and YB needed his to be boosted.

The whole possibility of vaccines that don't necessarily "work" is troubling to Americans who are used to vaccines' working. Get a polio vaccine, and you don't get polio. Get an MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine, and you don't get MMR. One can go on. Whether the CDC or the Biden administration meant it or not, Americans who chose to get vaccinated expected not to get sick. Some are getting sick and some are dying.

Understand that the percentage of so-called "breakthrough cases" is minuscule. The quote above indicates a death rate of less than four-tenths of one percent of those vaccinated. This is larger than zero, but it is small.

Moreover, vaccination keeps the morbidity (illness) rate down, at least among those who were vaccinated. An October 18 release from Acting Pennsylvania Physician General Denise Johnson indicated that 74% of the almost 5,000 hospitalizations in the past months were for those who were unvaccinated. Her statement continued that fully vaccinated people had a greater than three times better chance of staying out of the hospital due to COVID-19 (<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Post-Vaccination-Data.aspx>).

However, as of October 13, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (<https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/covid19-and-other-leading-causes-of-death-in-the-us/>), over 50 million American adults remain unvaccinated. The average daily number of deaths due to COVID-19 was 1,899, second only to heart diseases. As of today, October 20, 2021, between close to 750,000 Americans (depending on one's source) have died of COVID-19 since March 2020. A total of 800,000 deaths is entirely likely by the end of 2021, and the figure of one

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million COVID-19 related deaths by the time this is all over is entirely “thinkable”. The US appears nowhere close to a level of disease that will yield herd immunity.

This is a health economics blog, and economists seek to compare marginal benefits with marginal costs. The number of lives we continue to lose suggest that the marginal benefits of continued vaccination still far exceed the marginal costs. COVID-19 is like air pollution, and the marginal benefits of vaccination impact others positively because those vaccinated will be less likely to infect others. Vaccination is no more an “individual decision” than is the decision to run one’s car without an effective exhaust system, or the decision to pour raw sewage into a river that others are using. People who argue otherwise are either disingenuous or stupid.

In conclusion, the vaccines seem to work, but not one hundred percent. Heroes like General Powell will die before their time, and so will some number of others who are less obviously heroic. Continued mass vaccination will reduce deaths from COVID-19, but it seems that some deaths will continue. COVID-19 drives a hard bargain.

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