

Threats to COVID-19 vaccine acceptance and the role of strategic communications

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News on the development of several vaccines that may halt the spread of COVID-19, a pandemic that has gripped the globe for almost a year, is akin to the light at the end of what has been a very dark tunnel, providing some hope for life to return to normal.

Even stock markets around the world have reacted positively to this latest development.

Several preparatory steps must be taken as the world waits a few more months for vaccines to arrive at health facilities, and in the case of Malaysia as early as the first quarter of next year.

The greatest challenge then will no longer be on fighting COVID-19, as there is sufficient data about the "behaviour" of this virus.

The next obstacle will be on convincing the people to accept whichever COVID-19 vaccine the government opts for.

Just recently, The Star reported a survey that revealed over 90% of respondents who were interviewed stating they would agree to getting vaccinated against COVID-19.

If this number is translated into reality on the ground, Malaysia will not face a problem of achieving herd immunity that would only require 70% of the population, or some 21 million people, to receive vaccination against COVID-19. Here lies the problem – this cannot possibly be achieved easily.

An important factor that could stall the effort to achieve herd immunity is the anti-vaccination group. There is no study at present that can explain in detail the number of those who reject vaccinations. All that is known at this time is the existence of three main groups in the community when it comes to vaccines.

The first community is those who understand and are prepared to accept a vaccine. Perhaps, a study that states four out of five Malaysians are prepared to accept a vaccine had focused on asking this group within the population.

The second group refers to those who will consider whether they want to receive vaccination or not. The third is the anti-vaccination community.

We need to focus our attention on this third group, as they may influence the second group. For this reason, a more strategic approach is needed in communicating about the vaccine in an effort to reduce the influence that anti-vaxxers may have on the undecided group.

It must be noted that those against vaccines, although small in number, have a systematic chain of communication.

Detailed studies are needed to un-



derstand strategies and the movement of those who subscribe to the anti-vaccination thought.

Such studies are important in designing effective community strategies to counter this group, and to win them over.

However, this is just one side of the coin. Aside from those who hamper vaccination efforts, discussions must address the elephant in the room.

This is even more pertinent when the vaccination process is viewed within the framework of a physical area.

Designing effective vaccination strategies and comprehensive communications need to be considered. Each locality or state will have different criteria.

Within this context, Sabah needs a more specific communication strategy in the vaccination process. This is driven by one factor in the state that may be different from other parts of Malaysia.

Sabah has a social structure that is varied and even obscure in some ways – part of this is the state's large undocumented and stateless community. This is a reality that we cannot sweep under the carpet as they are part of the community.

The start of the third wave of COVID-19 in Sabah is linked to an undocumented individual. The biggest question here is the willingness of the government to bear the cost of COVID-19 vaccination for this group.

If the government chooses to provide vaccination to non-citizens, will this be accepted by Malaysians?

When a polio case was detected in Sabah last year, the source was an undocumented person. The question here is who is paying for the vaccination against polio for this group?

If there is no clear policy for non-citizens in the process of providing Covid-19 vaccines, the effort to create herd immunity will not be achieved.

The Malaysian Statistics Department in

2010 stated there were an estimated 1.2 million undocumented and stateless people in Sabah then. The total population of Sabah as of 2019 is 3.9 million.

This means one in three of the Sabah population is a stateless or undocumented person. This is a social structure that needs specific attention compared to other regions in Malaysia.

It is hoped any strategic communication committee formed by the government to educate the public on accepting the COVID-19 vaccine will factor in the above scenario, and not only place its focus on anti-vaxxers.

A detailed assessment on the knowledge, attitude, behaviour or practice of Malaysians and undocumented or stateless needs to be done in advance before the arrival of a vaccine early next year.

An understanding towards the knowledge, attitude and practice of Malaysians towards a COVID-19 vaccine will help in designing a strategic communication approach or effective information dissemination that not only reduces the threat from the anti-vaccination group but also influences positively the undocumented or stateless.

It does not matter if vaccines for non-citizens are eventually funded by the government or by international humanitarian agencies – efforts to convince the stateless or undocumented to accept the vaccine needs to be done in advance.

The scenario in Sabah of tracking down undocumented persons and testing them for the virus is an important lesson in public health. If early steps are not taken to provide an understanding to this community on the benefit of the vaccine, any effort to create herd immunity may fail.

In the larger context, a failure to create herd immunity will obstruct efforts by the government to pull Malaysia out of the threat of this pandemic.

A conducive scenario on the ground in accepting vaccination will boost the process to put an end to COVID-19 in Malaysia.

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