

Statement by the Minister of Health, Mr Constantinos Ioannou, at the press conference on the National Vaccination Plan for COVID-19

Firstly, thank you for your presence today. We thought it would be useful to hold today's conference after about 1.5 months since the start of the vaccinations in our country, at the same time as the other countries of the European Union.

We are now in the third phase of the National Vaccination Plan for COVID-19, namely in the age group 75-79, having completed the vaccinations in senior peoples' homes, while in the next few days the vaccination coverage of health professionals will be completed. Until yesterday, 41,673 people were vaccinated, of whom 14,105 completed their vaccination, having received both doses, while as of today the Vaccination Portal has been made available for people over 76, aiming at and in accordance with the total administration of all three vaccines of AstraZeneca, Moderna and Pfizer, to shield by the end of February those aged 75 and over, as well as specific vulnerable groups.

It is reminded that the aim of the National Vaccination Plan as it has been defined, was and is to protect vulnerable groups, including our elderly, who are most vulnerable to the virus and is the group that has the greatest risk of being hospitalized.

Unfortunately, the evidence speaks for itself. 182 of our fellow citizens, out of a total of 218 and 83%, who have died with the ultimate cause of death being COVID-19 were 70 years old and over, while the average age of the deceased is 79. At the same time, since the outbreak of the pandemic, about half of the cases treated in Intensive Care Units and High Dependency Units were 70 years old and over. Currently, the average age of the hospitalized is 64 years and the average age of those hospitalized in HDUs and ICUs is 66 years.

It is these fellow citizens, who fall within this age group, that we have set our primary goal to protect. And it's these fellow citizens, who through vaccination, regardless of the vaccine, we will shield against the virus, reducing the rate of hospitalization and saving lives. After all, since the beginning of the pandemic, our sole objective has been to protect human lives, the most precious good, and we remain committed to this.

And because, in recent days, there has been a public debate on the effectiveness of AstraZeneca's vaccine in people older than 65 years of age, given the opportunity, I would like to clarify once again: the decision to continue vaccination coverage without age restrictions was based on the conditions for the authorization of the vaccine by EMA. 27 scientist representatives from the EU member states, participating in EMA, by studying the data before them decided that the AstraZeneca vaccine would be given to people aged 18 and over, without age restrictions.

EMA's position was strengthened on Wednesday by the recommendation of the World Health Organization, which assessed it as safe for people over 65

years of age. The effectiveness of the AstraZeneca vaccine not only has not been challenged by any official authority in any country, but the vaccine is instead given to millions of elderly citizens in the United Kingdom, where a serious decline in hospitalized patients is noted. This confirms our choice to vaccinate the elderly first, thus protecting them from serious illness and/or death.

I understand the confusion caused by the strategy of other countries to lay down age restrictions on the administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Some countries have set the age limit of 55, others 65 and others 70 and others follow the indications of EMA.

In itself, the differentiation and disparity observed in the decisions on age limits, confirm the fact that countries have relied not only on scientific data but on a number of other factors (vaccination programme, availability of vaccines, etc.) depending on each country's strategy. And Cyprus' strategy, I repeat, has been and is from the beginning to save lives.

We are at a very decisive moment in the management of the pandemic and each step must be taken carefully and studied to achieve its purpose. We cannot afford to be consumed in public debates and spread doubt as to which vaccine is the best. We need to stay focused on our goal, and the general assumption is that vaccination saves lives. The risk of delaying vaccination outnumbers the benefit, especially for older ages, since a possible contamination during the time one will wait for the vaccine of their choice, endangers their safety and health.

Although the Vaccination Portal now offers to each of us the opportunity of information and choice on the type of vaccine to be administered, we should all bear in mind that there is no room for rejection of one vaccine over another.

And since for the next few weeks the scheduled deliveries for Pfizer and Moderna vaccines concern small quantities that cannot meet the needs of all **those interested**, they should be consciously aware that there may be a delay in their vaccination coverage, with everything this entails.

I am certain that, at this stage, most of us have understood that in order to free ourselves from the pandemic and return to normality, we need to trust experts and scientific documentation. We all have a duty to behave responsibly and in a serious manner, putting aside any conflicts that cause confusion and disruption to citizens. It is only by unity and unanimity that we can save the lives of our loved ones and ours.

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