

Testimony of Ali S. Khan, MD MPH, MBA

Dean

College of Public Health, University of Nebraska Medical Center

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U.S. House of Representatives

A Global Crisis Needs a Global Solution:

The Urgent Need to Accelerate Vaccinations Around the World

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This testimony reflects my views alone; I am not representing the views of the University of Nebraska.

A New Strategy to Bridge to the Post-Pandemic Period

Introduction

- Good afternoon, Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise and distinguished members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis.
- I'm Ali S. Khan, a physician, former Assistant Surgeon General at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention responsible for national preparedness, and currently dean of the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.
- I am pleased to be here today to offer testimony to support a new and improved strategy that will allow us to defeat COVID19 and end this pandemic domestically and globally.

Problem Statement

- In September of this year, COVID19 surpassed the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic death toll and is now the deadliest disease event in our nation's history.
- This is despite the scientific advancements we have made since the early 1900s and the oversized spending on healthcare per person compared to the rest of the world. And yet, 800,000 Americans have lost their lives from a preventable disease. And 5.3 million globally.
- Pandemics are a familiar and recurring part of our history; silently crossing borders and infecting and killing individuals without discrimination.
- Over the years many have claimed the title of the Great Pandemic or Black Death including plague, smallpox, cholera, tuberculosis, multiple strains of influenza, HIV, SARS, and now, COVID19. We have repeatedly addressed these pandemics and epidemics with better and better tools, technologies, and transformational solutions.
- The preventative and response actions that we take individually or through policy regulations to preserve and protect the lives of the whole population is the embodiment of **public health**.
- However, public health essentially boils down to how willing we are to give something up to help the collective good.
- The idea of collective good is woven throughout our society, such as not smoking indoors, buckling kids in car seats, or limiting industrial pollution of our food, air, or water. Similarly, we each willingly pay a little extra in taxes, to ensure everyone has clean water when they turn on the tap.

Why?

- So, two years later, why do we still say we are in a pandemic? Because COVID is still disrupting critical functions in our communities.
- Undoubtedly, we are in a much better position than we were a year ago. Yet, in the US, we still see almost 65,000 hospitalizations a day and healthcare rationing.
- States hit particularly hard by COVID19 have called the National Guard and military to help keep people out of critical care and address healthcare burnout. This should help free up space in hospitals for patients with COVID and also for those being turned away for strokes, heart attack, and even cancer.
- We also still see outbreaks in schools and businesses and sports that must close because too many people are ill.
- And the emergence of a new variant, like Omicron, sent capital markets into a tailspin. While the rise of the Omicron variant may or may not draw out this pandemic even further; we are at risk for a more infectious and deadly variant until we fully address this pandemic globally.

Solution – Public Health Science

- The end of COVID19, or at least a post-pandemic better normal with some ongoing disease, still depends on great public health science.
- Thanks to American ingenuity and the ability to persevere in some of the nation's darkest times, I am happy to tell you that we already have all of the transformational tools needed in our arsenal to beat COVID19.
 - We have vaccines that are proven to be safe and effective.
 - Quarantine, self-isolation, and masks are preventive and control methods proven by history to limit the spread of infectious diseases.
 - We are seeing new and cutting-edge oral antivirals emerge, and free COVID testing is available across the nation and including increasingly in our homes.

Solution – New Actions

- But the end of the pandemic no longer depends just on only public health science. It depends on action and rebuilding citizen trust in their government.
- The current pandemic and social environment now demand that we answer, as Americans, if the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one.
- How do we balance our right to freedom, personal autonomy and responsibilities, with the rights of everyone to be protected from infection and death, resulting from the emergence of a new infectious disease?
- Sacrificing for the common good is how communities are built. It is how wars are won.

- We also need to admit to ourselves that we are stalled and need a different strategy to defeat COVID and end this pandemic.

Solution – New Strategy

- We need new public health officials and national and local political leaders to help restore trust for those who are skeptical about the vaccine and even the disease itself.
- Additionally, we need to increase vaccine confidence. The 60% vaccination rate nationally is not enough to return our lives to something resembling "normal," even with those who have natural immunity or have a super hybrid immunity.
 - We need better solutions to increase coverage to 85% through standardized tests to recognize the duration of natural and acquired immunity; and vaccine mandates, incentives, or non-mandate approaches tailored to state and local community preferences that are people-centered and community based.
- We also need a public health system that is more consistent and willing to support early testing, isolation, quarantine, and mask mandates.
- We need public-private partnerships to support collection of real-time COVID19 data and to make your health data on vaccine, infection, testing, and exposure status readily available to you.
- And to fully protect us from new variants, we need to increase global vaccination rates through temporary waivers in intellectual property; sharing of licenses, technology, and know-how; removing export controls for critical materials; and continuing to release unused US vaccine.

Conclusion

- As somebody who has a 30-year experience responding to outbreaks all over the world, I want to assure you that there is hope, and a light at the end of the pandemic tunnel.
- We have seen research breakthroughs and the development of an effective vaccine that has allowed us to the return of concerts, vacations, and get togethers with our friends and family.
- And we have seen the resilience of the human spirit. We have all we need to get out of this pandemic, so I will leave you a simple message.
- As a nation, we need a new, improved strategy based on sound public health, political, and behavioral theories and models.
- With a new and improved strategy, we will be in a better position to contain and defeat COVID19 and end this pandemic and set the stage for a healthier future for all.
- As individuals, get vaccinated, get tested immediately if you suspect you are infected, and, where necessary, mask on America.

Thank you. I will try to answer any questions you might have.