

NewsHub

Claims Pfizer's vaccine is more dangerous than COVID-19 itself debunked

Dan Satherley 1 day ago



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Anti-vaccination activists are falsely claiming the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is killing more people than its saving.

The claims, based on misinterpreted data from the hugely successful Israeli rollout of the vaccine, are being amplified by a range of right-wing and religious websites based in North America and prominent conspiracy theorists and spreaders of misinformation like Pete Evans and David Icke.

The situation

Israel, on the cusp of a potentially devastating second wave of COVID-19, began its rollout of the vaccine on December 19. By mid-February, it was clear the vaccine was working just as well as Pfizer's phase III trials had suggested - with tests showing a 98.9 percent drop in the rate of hospitalisations and deaths amongst those who'd received their second shot, compared to those who hadn't.

As a result, the second wave of COVID-19 - driven by the more infectious B117 variant from the UK - peaked in mid-January, allowing restrictions to be lifted just weeks after they were put in place.

By this week, more than half the population had received at least the first dose, and a third the second, according to the Times of Israel. This week the paper reported of the first 1.82 million people immunised, there have only been 122 hospitalisations and 23 deaths from COVID-19.

"This data indicates that in a theoretical situation where we have 100 percent vaccine coverage, we would only need a few dozen COVID beds in the whole country, and only a handful for patients in serious condition," said Eyal Leshem, a member of the coronavirus team at Sheba Medical Center.

And in October, the number of over-70s needing ventilators outnumbered the under-50s by six-to-one; after widespread vaccination amongst the elderly, they're now about equal, researchers said in February.

The number of COVID-19 patients in Israeli hospital beds has nearly halved in the past six weeks.

The claims

The evidence hasn't deterred peddlers of misinformation. The current claim sweeping the internet is that data from the Israeli Ministry of Health shows the vaccine has killed "40 times more [elderly] people than the disease itself would have killed", and 260 times the number of young people.

It first appeared in a forum post on an Israeli website called Nakim, which describes itself as a "voluntary organisation of citizens via the Internet in order to fight government corruption and return power to the people" which according to French science journalist Jean-Francois Cliche who analysed the claims, "publishes content with a strong conspiratorial content".

The analysis was supposedly done by French scientist Hervé Seligmann, apparently a zoologist formerly of Aix-Marseille University, and self-described engineer Haim Yativ, who called the reality on the ground in Israel a "new Holocaust".

"The new cases of COVID-19 confirmed daily did not decrease as they do during lockdowns," they claimed according to a report on their findings in French online tabloid France Soir. They also claimed that "severe, critical and fatal cases increased" after the vaccine rollout began, despite the lockdown.

"Our analyses indicate order-of-magnitude increases in mortality rates during the five-week vaccination process, compared to unvaccinated and those after completing the vaccination process."



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The claim was picked up by veteran British eccentric David Icke, who last year was booted off most social media sites for spreading COVID-19 misinformation; and celebrity chef and conspiracy theorist Pete Evans, who shared an article about the claims posted by anti-vaccination and anti-fluoridation group Children's Health Defense (the same article appeared on the website LifeSiteNews, founded by a Canadian conservative group to initially oppose abortion, but which has since branched out into publishing "misleading information" according to fact-check site Snopes).

That article has also been sent to NewsHub by readers, including one who said it would be a "crime against humanity" not to report it.

The reality

The central claim is that "during the five weeks since the first dose at least 0.05 percent of first dose recipients died". Extrapolated out to a year, this would be a crude population-wide mortality rate of about 0.5 percent - which actually lines up exactly with Israel's annual mortality rate, according to the World Bank.

Cliche, writing for French newspaper Le Soleil, said the tabloid France Soir "has made many scientists cringe in recent months by repeatedly publishing falsehoods about the coronavirus".

"From what I have seen, the statistics presented in [the original post on Nakim] are real. But the use that is made of it is a fine illustration of this scientific maxim that it is with data like people: if we torture them long enough, they end up saying whatever we want," he wrote, according to an automated Google translation.

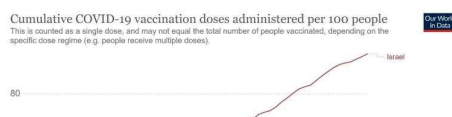
The data on hospitalisations used in the post were a snapshot on a single day when only half the patients would have had the vaccine more than 14 days beforehand, which is how long it takes for some of its efficacy to kick in, Cliche said; while the death data used in the post covered an entire two-week period - so the claims were comparing "apples with oranges".

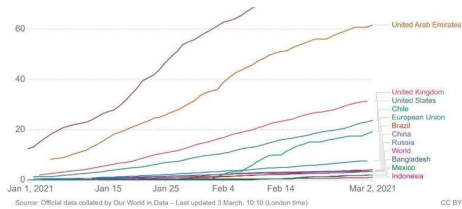
The post also claims deaths in Israel rose after the vaccination programme began - which is true, but only because that's when the country's massive second wave hit.

"Israel reached nearly 1000 new cases per million population (seven-day moving average) daily in January," Cliche wrote, so it was "therefore inevitable that mortality from COVID-19 would be concentrated in the past two months, regardless of vaccination efforts".

Since then, he says more robust data has found the vaccine is working wonders at reducing transmission and death. While the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech does provide some protection, it doesn't really start being effective until a couple of weeks after it's given; and the full efficacy of around 95 percent - according to its trial data - doesn't happen until weeks after the second dose.

Another claim in the post is that deaths from COVID-19 in Israel are now slowing because the vaccination campaign is "losing its momentum". This is demonstrably false - since mid-January, the number of people dying from COVID-19 each day has more than halved, while vaccination data shows the number of doses administered in Israel has continued its upward trajectory over the past two months, with no signs of slowing down.





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"The theory that Pfizer's vaccine worsened the symptoms of COVID-19 in Israel really doesn't mesh well with the 'big picture' of the situation there," said Cliche.

"If this had been the case, we should have seen the complications continue to increase as the vaccination progressed, but it is the opposite that we saw: the number of patients in serious condition increased by almost 1200 in mid-January to 770 last Wednesday, according to figures from the Israeli Ministry of Health, and the daily number of COVID-19-related deaths fell from 7.5 per million at the end of January to just 3 in the middle of last week."

The infection fatality rate of COVID-19 is not yet clear, with many infected not showing symptoms - but still able to spread it. To date, based on known cases of the disease which have run their course, the case fatality rate is about 3 percent. It's come down since the early days of the pandemic, with better testing finding more mild cases of the disease and treatments improving.

Similar claims


There have been similar claims the vaccine is killing people made in other countries where it's been rolled out, none of which have held up to any scrutiny. Twenty-three elderly people in Norway died after getting the vaccine, according to a viral claim in early February; investigations found no links to the vaccine, many were already sick and there had been no statistical increase in the number of deaths normally recorded in the Scandinavian country's rest homes.

Similar conclusions were reached in investigations into deaths amongst the vaccinated elderly in Germany and Belgium.


A viral video claiming to link deaths to the vaccine in Israel in February also turned out to be based on flimsy anecdotal evidence, and in one case, the patient had actually died of COVID-19.

Six people who took part in the Pfizer/BioNTech phase III trial died - but only two of them had received the vaccine, the others a placebo. The death rate was statistically insignificant, and in line with what would be expected amongst the volunteer population.


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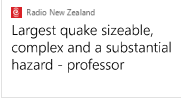
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