

Faculty and staff at the University of Guelph support SARS-CoV-2 vaccine safety

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We are a science-based faculty and staff at the University of Guelph who support evidence-based decisions and disagree with misinformation being circulated by a member of the faculty at the Ontario Veterinary College.

COVID-19 is an unprecedented pandemic due to a novel coronavirus. Nearly four million people globally have died as a result, and nearly two hundred million have been reported as infected.¹ Many millions more have suffered and continue to suffer from physical and mental illness associated with the pandemic, isolation, poverty, and the long-term effects of the infection.²

Vaccines for SARS-CoV-2 were designed, tested and produced at an unprecedented speed and on an extraordinary scale. The ability to quickly develop safe and effective vaccines was made possible through remarkable global co-operation and by concurrently running clinical trials, not by cutting corners. Many countries rapidly authorized vaccines for emergency use. Various types of vaccines are available, including those based on mRNA coding for the viral spike (S) protein, vector-based DNA vaccines coding for the S protein, and recombinant S protein particles. Two doses of the vaccines (type-dependent) have dramatically reduced illness and infections in many parts of the world.³ The vaccines are highly effective and have very few adverse effects.⁴ The coordinated effort of scientists, pharmaceutical companies, public health and regulatory agencies to produce effective vaccines against COVID-19 for billions of people in less than a year is an achievement previously unimaginable.

Dr. Byram Bridle has stated on multiple platforms and numerous outlets that COVID-19 vaccines are unsafe. These statements are contrary to overwhelming scientific evidence. The S protein generated by or incorporated into vaccines is an effective immunogen but does not alter DNA, does not induce infertility or pass through breast milk, and is not a toxin.^{5,6} Adverse vaccine effects do occur but at a similar or lower frequency than for routine vaccines.⁴ In the face of this terrible pandemic, widespread vaccination is the best way out of the devastation we currently face. Many people have limited understanding of the complexities of immunization against infectious agents, and rely on scientists in epidemiology and immunology to share their knowledge and experience, especially at times such as these when fear is high. Misinformation spread by individuals such as Dr. Bridle targets uncertainty.

The University of Guelph, including us, supports freedom of expression. However, as scientists and academics we also have a responsibility to counter misinformation, particularly when the misinformation causes harm. A high rate of vaccine acceptance is essential for prevention of SARS-CoV-2 disease and deaths, and for a return to normalcy. In particular, given the high transmissibility of recent variants, very high vaccination rates among people eligible for vaccination are critical. We are very concerned that people who are not seeking vaccination because of misinformation will suffer ill effects from SARS-CoV-2 infection, will infect others, and will slow the return to a more normal life. Academic freedom is important but should not be a license to spread misinformation that has been clearly refuted, including by authors of publications that Dr. Bridle cites in support of his statements.⁷ Some may even consider the University of Guelph complicit by failing to provide a clear and effective response to this misinformation

campaign, which is impacting the reputation of the institution and its faculty. Considering the harmful effects of COVID-19 on individuals and communities, the continued spread of misinformation undermines Canadian public health measures, including our vaccine program, and threatens global health security more broadly.

Therefore, we wish to state publicly that as scientists, faculty, and/or staff of the University of Guelph we stand firmly against the continued spread of factually incorrect and misleading information that is being disseminated by Dr. Bridle. We have confidence that the SARS-CoV-2 vaccines approved for use in Canada are safe and effective, and we wish to reassure the public that as members of the University of Guelph community we fully support evidence-based public health, which includes vaccination against COVID-19.

References

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3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines.html>; accessed June 24, 2021
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5. Drugs and Lactation Database (LactMed) [Internet]. Bethesda (MD): National Library of Medicine (US); 2006-. COVID-19 vaccines. [Updated 2021 Jun 21]
6. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/pregnancy.html>; accessed June 24, 2021
7. <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-vaccine-safe-idUSL2N2NX1J6>; accessed June 24, 2021

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