

COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force

ISSUE: ISED and the NRC have received media questions regarding conflicts of interest for Vaccine Task Force members.

KEY MESSAGES

- **The COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force was created to provide expert advice to the Government of Canada on the development, access to and manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines.**
- **The Task Force assembles leading experts from academia, research and industry who have proven abilities in developing and commercializing vaccines.**
- **The Task Force’s advice complements the due diligence and analysis conducted by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, Health Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada and others.**
- **The Task Force has a robust conflict of interest process in place, which is consistent with the practices of other volunteer external advisory bodies to government and embodies international best practices.**
- **Task Force members are top scientific and industry experts who are volunteering their time to help ensure that the government is making sound evidence-based decisions to protect the health and safety of Canadians during the pandemic.**

SUPPLEMENTARY MESSAGES

- **The COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force assembles experts from academia, research and industry who have proven abilities in developing and commercializing vaccines.**

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- Members of the Task Force are top scientific and industry experts who are volunteering their time and stepping-up to serve Canada during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Since June, the members have worked tirelessly to study, review and debate the many vaccine, and bio manufacturing options that are available, so that the government's decisions are based on the best available evidence and scientific advice.
- The Task Force has advised the government across a number of vaccine candidates, as well as bio manufacturing opportunities.
- The Task Force's recommendations regarding which vaccine candidates to pursue are largely consistent with the decisions being made by other jurisdictions.
- The Task Force's important work assists the efforts being undertaken by the government to secure access to promising vaccine candidates and bio manufacturing capacity.
- The government will continue to explore, and pursue, all promising options to ensure a secure supply of potential vaccines and to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

If pressed on the recent resignation of one of the Task Force members (Dr. Gary Kobinger):

- The government thanks Dr. Kobinger for his participation and public service as a member of the COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force.
- As experts and industry leaders, Task Force members provide invaluable insight -- all on a volunteer basis -- to help the government make sound evidence-based decisions to protect the health and safety of Canadians during the pandemic.
- Since June 2020, the Task Force and its Bio-manufacturing Sub-Committee have reviewed and provided advice on numerous domestic vaccine and bio-manufacturing proposals and international vaccine candidates.
- Task Force members have committed to ensuring transparency and to recusing themselves from providing advice on projects where there is a conflict.
- In 23 instances, a member of the Task Force declared a conflict of interest pertaining to a specific proposal, or candidate, and formally recused themselves -- not participating in deliberations or the formulation of advice.
- The conflict of interest protocol available on the NRC website is in line with standards for other volunteer external advisory bodies across government, and embodies international best practices.

If pressed on differences of opinion within the Vaccine Task Force:

- The COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force assembles experts from academia, research and industry who have proven abilities in developing and commercializing vaccines.
- Free and open debate among members of the Task Force is an important part of the deliberation process.
- When scientists and other experts disagree, the discussion that ensues contributes to the quality of the advice that is received by the government.

If pressed on whether Vaccine Task Force meetings should be open to the media/public:

- The Vaccine Task Force reviews commercially confidential and sensitive information, and discussions occur in confidence.
- As a result, all Task Force members have signed non-disclosure agreements.
- Task Force members continue to make themselves available to the media and the public to speak about their voluntary work in an open and transparent way.

If pressed on why the government put together a body where members have conflicts:

- The Vaccine Task Force was created to provide advice to the Government of Canada on the development, access to and manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines.

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- Members of the Task Force were appointed because of their significant experience in vaccine development and commercialization -- experience that is critical to providing the best possible advice to the government.
- As experts with deep experience in this area, Task Force members naturally have ties to various companies in their field of expertise.
- The Task Force has a robust protocol in place to manage potential conflicts of interests.
- Canada's approach is consistent with other countries', including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and France.

If pressed on whether the government is pursuing a sound strategy:

- The Government of Canada is pursuing a balanced portfolio approach to COVID-19 vaccine candidates, and is intentionally investing in different types of vaccines to ensure that Canada has access to the safest, most effective vaccine or vaccines that become available.
- The government is acting based on the best possible expert advice, consistent with the approach and actions being taken by other countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and France.

If pressed more generally on who needs to be informed about conflicts of interest:

- The Task Force has a robust protocol in place to manage potential conflicts of interests.
- Generally, conflicts of interest are declared by experts when providing advice, speaking or publishing to the intended recipient -- for example, if publishing research in a scientific publication, any conflicts are disclosed to the reader in the article.
- This is also the case when experts provide advice and/or recommendations to the government -- conflicts are disclosed, documented, and the expert recuses themselves when a conflict exists.

If pressed on how conflict screens work:

- The Task Force has a robust protocol in place to manage potential conflicts of interests.
- When assessing projects for funding, members are required to be transparent about their interests and potential for conflict. Those with conflicts must formally recuse themselves.
- Each Task Force member signed a Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement, and completed and signed a Conflict of Interest Declaration form.
- At the start of each meeting, the co-Chairs ask members to declare any conflicts with the agenda items of that meeting and ask members who have a disqualifying conflict to recuse themselves from that discussion.
- In 23 instances, a member of the Task Force declared a conflict of interest pertaining to a specific proposal, or candidate, and formally recused themselves -- not participating in deliberations or the formulation of advice.
- The conflict of interest protocol is publicly available on the NRC's website.

If pressed on what is considered a disqualifying conflict:

- A disqualifying conflict includes a direct or indirect financial benefit, close personal relationships (both positive and negative), undue institutional/regional loyalties, and other influences that could cloud an objective assessment.

If pressed on how many times Task Force members have recused themselves due to a conflict of interest:

- Since June 2020, the COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force and its Bio-manufacturing Sub-Committee have reviewed and provided advice on numerous domestic vaccine and bio-manufacturing proposals and international vaccine candidates.

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- In 23 instances, a member of the Task Force declared a conflict of interest pertaining to a specific proposal, or candidate, and formally recused themselves -- not participating in deliberations or the formulation of advice.

If pressed on why the conflict of interest declarations are not publicly listed on the registry:

- The Vaccine Task Force is committed to transparency and has a robust conflict of interest process in place.
- The process is consistent with the practices of other volunteer external advisory bodies to government and embodies international best practices.
- Given the significant interest in the Vaccine Task Force's process, the Task Force is taking the exceptional step of publishing [a registry of declared interests](#).
- The registry will be updated on the NRC's website following each vaccine announcement by the government that is based on a Task Force recommendation.

If pressed on consultations with the ethics commissioner:

- Members of the Task Force are not public office holders.
- As a volunteer external advisory body, members do not report declarations to the ethics commissioner. Members' Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreements are reported to Innovation, Science and Economic Development and the Secretariat, and all members recuse themselves from a recommendation when deemed to be in conflict.
- All recommendations of the Task Force and records of recusals are formally reported in writing to the responsible Ministers and are kept as part of the official ISED records. This process is entirely consistent with other volunteer external advisory bodies to government.

BACKGROUND

On August 5, 2020, Minister Bains and Minister Anand announced the creation and membership of the COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force (VTF). The VTF's mandate is to provide advice to the Government of Canada on Canada's COVID-19 vaccine strategy, with a focus on investments to support the development and production of a safe and effective vaccine for Canadians.

Since June 2020, the VTF has been providing advice on prioritizing vaccine projects seeking support for activities in Canada, identifying and connecting with international vaccine candidates of interest to Canada, and considering options to manufacture the most promising COVID-19 vaccines. The VTF has 12 members, including two co-Chairs. There are also four senior federal officials who are ex-officio members. The VTF will be in place for a period of at least 12 months, subject to extension at the discretion of the Government of Canada.

The VTF's mandate is to provide advice to the Government of Canada on COVID-19 vaccines, which can include:

- prioritizing vaccine projects seeking support for activities in Canada;
- attracting to Canada promising non-Canadian vaccine candidates, or partnering with developers of non-Canadian vaccine candidates;
- optimizing the tools needed for vaccine development;
- supporting effective research and development, and supply chain coordination for COVID-19 vaccine projects;
- facilitating solutions to manufacture the most promising COVID-19 vaccines in Canada; and

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- identifying opportunities to enhance business connectivity globally to secure access to vaccines with key commercial sponsors.

Vaccine proposals submitted to ISED seeking Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) funding are reviewed by the VTF. Upon completion of the review, the VTF provides advice to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry for their consideration and support. ISED then undertakes final internal due diligence on the project proposals and submits analysis and advice to the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, who has decision-making authority related to SIF funding decisions.

PREPARATION AND APPROVALS

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