

# **Pandemic Ethics: Five Lessons**

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# *Lesson One: Abandon the ICU Admission Lottery*

- **Pre-pandemic standard procedure for assigning beds in an ICU:**  
First in, first served.
- **Pandemic rule: maximize the benefits.**
- Recommendations of the working group of the Italian Society of Anaesthesia, Analgesia, Resuscitation, and Intensive Care:
- Admit those who have the greatest chance of survival and are likely to have the most years of life ahead of them.
- If necessary to admit more patients, move out of the ICU those who are not responding well.

# Objection to Lesson One

- Rationing care based on age shows:  
**“a dangerous kneejerk ageism, where the older we get, the less value we have and the less important our lives are to save.”**
- Catherine Foot, Centre for Ageing Better, as quoted in *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020.

# *Lesson Two: Experiment on Humans*

## **Pre-pandemic standard:**

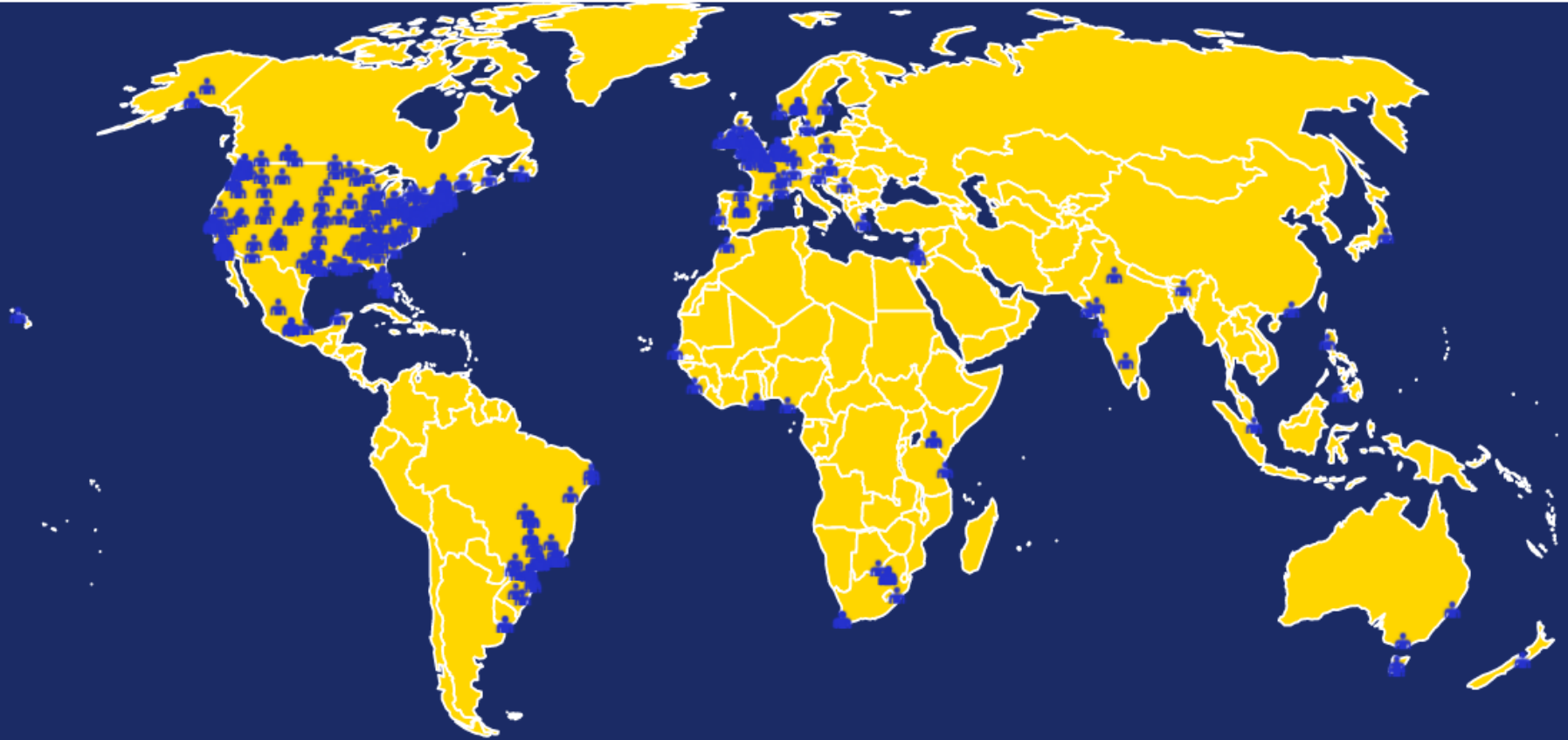
“While the primary purpose of medical research is to generate new knowledge, this goal can never take precedence over the rights and interests of individual research subjects.”

- World Medical Association, *Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects*, 2013, Article 8.

# Pandemic Ethics: Apply the principle of *risk parity*

- If it is permissible to expose some members of society (for example, health workers), to a given level of risk because the costs of not doing so are too high for others, then it is permissible to expose *fully-informed volunteers* to a comparable level of risk in the context of promising research into the virus.
- Sources: A.J. London, "Reasonable risks in clinical research: a critique and a proposal for the Integrative Approach," *Statistics in Medicine*, 25 (2006), 2869-2885; F. Miller and S. Joffe, "Limits to Research Risks," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 35 (2009), 445-449; Peter Singer and Richard Yetter Chappell, "Pandemic Ethics: The Case for Risky Research," *Research Ethics*, 16, 3-4 (2020) 1-8.

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# The Risk Parity Principle Applied

- During a pandemic, when each day that delays the availability of a safe and effective vaccine costs thousands of lives, *Human Challenge Trials* are ethically acceptable.

# *Lesson Three: Make the Best Use of Vaccines (priority)*

- Health care workers save the lives of others, so they should get priority.
- The fact that the elderly are at *much* greater risk of dying than the young means that they should get priority, even though they are likely to have fewer years to live.



## *Lesson Three: Make the Best Use of Vaccines (priority)*

- Is the fact that in the US, the elderly are disproportionately white, a reason for giving priority to others?
- No, and especially not if the non-white minority groups would suffer more fatalities as a result of the proposal.
- Race should be taken into account only where it indicates higher medical risk.

# *Lesson Three: Make the Best Use of Vaccines (priority)*

- Maximize the number of life-years saved, *worldwide*.
- We are far from doing this.
- 43.3% of the world population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Only 1.9% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose.

# *Lesson Three: Make the Best Use of Vaccines - mandates*

- **2. Is mandatory vaccination an unjustifiable infringement on individual freedom?**

# Does paternalism justify making vaccines mandatory?

“I’m admitting young healthy people to the hospital with very serious COVID infections. One of the last things they do before they’re intubated is beg me for the vaccine. I hold their hand and tell them that I’m sorry, but it’s too late. A few days later when I call time of death, I hug their family members and I tell them the best way to honor their loved one is to go get vaccinated and encourage everyone they know to do the same. They cry. And they tell me they didn't know. They thought it was a hoax. They thought it was political. They thought because they had a certain blood type or a certain skin color they wouldn't get as sick. They thought it was ‘just the flu.’ But they were wrong. And they wish they could go back. But they can’t.”

Posted on Facebook, July 18, 2021 by Dr Brytney Cobia, Birmingham, Alabama

# Mill: Against state paternalism

- “His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant [for state coercion]. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right.”
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*.

# Mill: The Harm Principle

- “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*.

# Lesson Four: Evaluating Lockdowns



- Lockdowns save lives, but cause unemployment, economic hardship, domestic violence, depression... can we compare the costs and benefits?

# Difficult, but necessary ...

- **We need better ways of comparing different harms and benefits.**
- **That will require both more information – for example, about how to measure subjective well-being – and ethical deliberation about what we need to measure and how to weigh different factors.**



# *Lesson Five: Preventing Pandemics*

- “Zoonotic diseases are very common, both in the United States and around the world. Scientists estimate that more than 6 out of every 10 known infectious diseases in people can be spread from animals, and 3 out of every 4 new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals.”
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S.
- <https://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/basics/zoonotic-diseases.html>



**Intensive chicken production has been described as “The single most severe, systematic example of man’s inhumanity to another sentient animal.” (Prof. John Webster, University of Bristol). It is also a danger to human health.**

# With thanks to ...

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- This lecture draws on the following previously published writings: Peter Singer and **Paola Cavalieri**, "The Two Dark Sides of COVID-19," *Project Syndicate*, March 2020; Peter Singer, "Ethical decisions about who lives and who dies may not be hypothetical," *The Age*, March 21, 2020; Peter Singer and **Michael Plant**, "When Will the Pandemic Cure Be Worse Than the Disease?" *Project Syndicate*, April 2020; Peter Singer, "The Duel: Is it More Important to Save Younger Lives? Yes." *Prospect*, May 4, 2020; Peter Singer and **Richard Yetter Chappell**, "Pandemic Ethics: The Case for Risky Research," *Research Ethics*, 16, 3-4 (2020) 1-8; Peter Singer and **Isaac Martinez**, "The Case for Human COVID-19 Challenge Trials" *Project Syndicate*, August 2020; Peter Singer, "To Lock Down or Not to Lock Down?" *Project Syndicate*, October 2020; Peter Singer, "The Ethics of Prioritizing Covid-19 Vaccination," *Project Syndicate*, January 2021; Peter Singer, "When Vaccination is a 'Crime'" *Project Syndicate*, March 2021; Peter Singer, "Why Vaccination Should be Compulsory," *Project Syndicate*, August 4, 2021.
- My co-authors have contributed greatly to my thinking about these issues.