

Vaccine reducing fatalities among city's elderly: UK mathematician

MALATHY.IYER@TIMESGROUP.COM

Mumbai:

In what could be the first indication of the Covid-19 vaccination drive working, some experts say deaths among the elderly have reduced in the ongoing second wave in Mumbai.

London mathematician Murad Banaji has calculated that there has been 40% fewer deaths than expected among the elderly during the second wave. On Friday, Banaji tweeted, "There isn't much good news coming out of India. Here's some: Mumbai's data is showing what looks like vaccines reducing Covid fatalities." Calling the effect significant, he said, "Deaths in the over-60s this week are around 40% less than expected based on trends up to late March and deaths in under -60s." The timing is about right as the vaccination drive for the 60-plus started on March 1 and the "first hints" of an effect were apparent by April 8, said Banaji.

Healthcare professionals, among them Dr Shashank Joshi, say they are sceptical. Dr Joshi, member of the state government task force on Covid-19, said it was too early to make correlations between the vaccination drive and deaths. At present, only 18.5 lakh of the city's 1.4 crore population has taken at least one dose of either Covishield or Covaxin.

TOO EARLY TO SAY: CITY EXPERTS

➤ Data shows 40% fewer deaths than expected among Mumbai's elderly, says UK mathematician Murad Banaji

➤ But city health experts sceptical, say it's too early to make correlations between vax drive, deaths

➤ Observe that only 18.5 lakh of Mumbai's 1.4cr population have got at least one shot

➤ BMC's health officer says there has been a drop in fatalities, but details are still being worked out



City cases slip under 6k, but deaths at 70+

For the first time this month, daily cases in Mumbai dropped below 6,000 (5,867), but the state continued to log over 60,000 infections at 67,160. Also, for the third day in a row, the city recorded over 70 deaths, while the state registered 676 fatalities on Saturday. The state's total caseload stands at 42.2 lakh. [P 2](#)

'At least 30% of people must get vaccine to see its effect'

Dr Gagandeep Kang from Christian Medical College, Vellore, who has worked extensively with vaccines, said: "We will need to immunise at least 30% of people before we begin to see the effect that is driven by vaccines alone."

Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) executive health officer Dr Mangala Gomare said that the public health department, too, had noted a drop in deaths among people over the age of 60 years in the city.

"However, we are still working out the details," Dr Gomare said.

While many doctors and health professionals involved with the fight against Covid-19 in Mumbai acknowledge that the vaccination has possibly reduced the severity of symptoms among people, the stark effect of vaccination as seen in countries such as Israel and the United Kingdom, where 60% and 50% of the total population, respectively, has been administered at least the first vaccine shot, is missing.

In India, only 8.3% of the total population has been vaccinated against Covid-19 so far.

For one, there is evidence trickling in from other countries that vaccinations have led to fewer hospitalisations.

"The latest being the UK, which has reported 70% drop in hospitalisations," said Dr Kang.

In Israel, residents of certain areas have been allowed to walk outdoors without a face mask.

There has been considerable vaccine hesitancy or fear in Mumbai as well as the rest of India.

A municipal doctor said that every time the government opened up vaccination for a particular age group, there were crowds at the vaccination centres. “But after 10 days, the crowds dry out. It shows those who wanted to take the vaccine did at the earliest, while others are fence-sitters or not interest,” the doctor said.

One of the biggest hurdles in the mass immunisation drive is people’s belief that vaccines offer 100% coverage against a microbe when they are known to only reduce the severity of the disease.

“The vaccines we have do work,” said Dr Kang. “When the data on positive people who do not or rarely need hospitalisation is available at scale, it will tell us that the vaccines are working,” the doctor added.