

A Shot in The Arm

The first vaccine against COVID-19 was given emergency approval by the World Health Organisation exactly one year after it had received the first reports of a novel pneumonia-causing virus in Wuhan, China.

The date was 31 December 2020, and the vaccine was the Cominarty COVID-19 mRNA vaccine, also known as the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

With foresight and propelled by necessity, IJN immediately started planning for the vaccination of its staff, sure in the knowledge that it would only be a matter of time before supplies arrived as per the national vaccination programme to inoculate frontliners in the First Phase of the National COVID Immunisation Programme (NIP) or known as **Program Imunisasi COVID-19 Kebangsaan (PICK)**.

“While right from the onset, we wanted to handle the vaccination of our frontliners in-house. We also had longer-term considerations of our very vulnerable patients and were hoping that this way we would be able to smoothen and hasten the entire process for all our stakeholders.”

“And so, we requested for this and eventually became the **first private hospital** to be registered as a **PPV** in Phase 1 itself,” says Senior Principal Pharmacist **Ms Kamales Arumugam**.

Then the real work began. A task force, led by Ms Kamales, was formed, comprising key personnel from various departments including Emergency & Observation, Nursing, Pharmacy, Management Information Systems, Quality Management, Laboratory, Occupational Safety & Health, Human Capital and Organizational Development, Corporate Communications and CPR Faculty.



Ms. Kamales

This task force of 18 people brainstormed, planned, executed and implemented the A-Z of the hospital’s COVID Vaccination Programme, which would eventually take them from Phase 1 right through to Phase 6 of booster and third doses for frontliners.

This included the purchase of equipment, and the access, management, storage and dispensation of the vaccines with all its specific requirements, for a start. Then there were the MIS requirements, identification of vaccinees, scheduling, vaccination processes, Adverse Event Following Immunisation (AEFI) management and reporting, and many minute details that had to be looked into.

Not to mention the training for the staff on all the above-mentioned matters and also on policy, PICK, VMS, MyVAS & MySejahtera.

Including the core team, 35 staff were trained by MOH in all these areas. The core team then trained the rest of the staff who were involved in the vaccination programme.

We used our Auditorium as the vaccination centre. The set-up of this area included the registration stations, consent room, vaccination stations, observation station, sickbay, and a whole IT framework.

“Everything and I mean EVERYTHING, had to be by the book, strictly and without exception following MOH and MKN guidelines under the NIP,” Kamales says, adding that one of the crucial areas was the access and storage of the vaccines because of the stringent requirements, especially for Pfizer BioN/Tech vaccines.

IJN’s supply of these vaccines came from Hospital Kuala Lumpur, one of the few designated vaccine storage centres with Ultra Low-Temperature Freezers.

“Supply picks up were especially interesting, with practice runs before the whole thing commenced. We would pick up twice a week based on the vaccination schedule, collecting the exact amount needed each time. The short trip between HKL and IJN had all the drama of police outriders and flashing lights to get the vaccines here as safely and quickly as possible.”

The timing mattered because of the very particular requirements of the Pfizer vaccines, which have to be thawed before use. After thawing, it was only viable for five days, stored under strict temperature requirements. Today, these vaccines have longer use-by dates.

For this, we had to purchase WHO certified equipment approved by MOH, and with the higher demand at that time, the hospital was fortunate that it could access the right medical fridges, data loggers and cold storage boxes within that short time frame.

“It was imperative that we had the required paraphernalia to ensure zero wastage. We also had to include contingency plans in the event of power outages.”

Our vaccination programme and set-up were audited by the Kuala Lumpur Health Department (JKWPKL&P), who, wholly impressed by the hospital’s preparations, readiness and attention to detail, gave it the thumbs up during a surprise inspection.

Our PPV administered its **first vaccine** on **1 March 2021**, with its clinical staff, who were in direct contact with patients, taking priority. These were the doctors, nurses, MA’s, pharmacists, radiographers, clinic assistants, and hospital aides. They were followed by non-clinical and essential staff, and eventually our cleaning and security personnel from external contractors and others who are permanently situated at the hospital.

“Because supply was limited in these initial stages, we had to follow the vaccination schedule given by MOH. In that first week, we dispensed some 500 vaccines, and subsequently, the figure rose to 138 a day, depending on the schedule,” Kamales recalls.

“There were many considerations before we submitted our staff vaccination list to MOH. While we wanted to vaccinate our clinical staff as quickly as possible, we thankfully had the foresight to send them in batches. With the possibility of vaccine side effects, we did not want a situation whereby staff of a whole department were incapacitated all at once because of side effects!”

From 1 March to 28 May 2021, IJN vaccinated 2,742 people. Of these, 2,409 were IJN staff, while others and external contractors as well as MOH personnel. Today (November 2021), IJN is proud to say that 99.9% of its staff have been vaccinated.

“The entire endeavour was much more elaborate and complex than I had anticipated, and it turned to be a huge learning curve for us. I am incredibly proud of our core team, who gave their all in organising and implementing this programme. We had a lot of late nights, furious deadlines, a lot of hair-pulling and countless challenges. We were constantly on our toes as things were so fluid, and we had to mitigate changes as soon as information trickled in.

“We are still on our toes now, as vaccinations are still ongoing with new directives every so often, and now with the booster doses. But it has been a job well done. The vaccinations of our frontliners have truly been a shot in the arm, literally and figuratively, as the protection the vaccines offer has eased their anxieties somewhat and lent them strength to continue their invaluable roles.”

