

Indian hospital closed amid fake COVID vaccine scam

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New Delhi, July 4 (RHC)-- Over a dozen private vaccination centers in India have been “immunizing” people with salt water and antibiotics labeled as vaccines. While arrests are being made, over 2,500 are left defenseless ahead of a potential new wave.

Mumbai’s local government sealed Shivam Hospital over the weekend, local media reported, saying its license has been canceled in suspected connection to a massive vaccine scam. Police are investigating whether fake Covid vaccines originated from the hospital, with its owners now being arrested.

Earlier this year, it enlisted as a private vaccination center and received the government's permission to immunize people against the virus. It had received over 20,000 vaccine vials from Mumbai's governing civic body, BMC, India Today reported. However, some of them might have ended up in the hands of scammers, police suspect, saying the hospital might have withheld vials to use them in illegal schemes, including refilling empty vaccine bottles with salt water.

India's official COVID death toll climbs past 400,000, but real figure could be drastically higher India's official Covid death toll climbs past 400,000, but real figure could be drastically higher.

At least 2,000 people "vaccinated" in Mumbai in May and June were injected with a saline solution, the Indian Express reported, citing local police. "We have arrested all the big fish by now. We will arrest more if anybody else is found involved," Mumbai's joint commissioner of police, law and order, Vishwas Nangre Patil, announced at a press conference.

So far, at least 10 vaccination centers are being investigated in the scam, and are suspected of obtaining around 2,600,000 rupees (\$35,000) from fake shots.

Two of the victims, Hiren Mehta from Mumbai and his wife, paid around 1,260 rupees (\$23) each for what they thought was a coronavirus vaccine. They say that now they can't receive a proper shot, as they received fake certificates from the private center which were entered into a government vaccination database.

"Our main concern is what they have injected into our body. And then to find out when we can get our first dose because the third wave is approaching," the man told the Straits Times. Police in Mumbai are still investigating what substance was injected into the patients, though it is suspected that the vials were refilled with saline water. In a separate case in Kolkata, antibiotics might have been used instead of the vaccine.

Nearly 500 people, some of them disabled, are feared to have been fraudulently administered with Amikacin – an antibiotic medicine used to treat bacterial infections, including meningitis, as well as blood, bone, and urinary infections. The seized vials were falsely labeled as the AstraZeneca Covid vaccine, branded as Covishield in India, AFP reported, citing local police. A man posing as a civil servant with a master's degree in genetics has been arrested, suspected to have set up several scam vaccination centers in the region. Its patients are now in panic over the possible side effects.

"If any emergency arises, civic authorities will organize medical camps in the area to take care of those who have had fake shots," Kolkata health official Debasish Barui told the news agency. Authorities also plan to conduct antibody tests on nearly 2,700 potential fraud victims, The Indian Express reported, however, in some cases it might still leave people unprotected.

"The test showed good antibody levels. But I don't know if I caught COVID and was asymptomatic or if the vaccine I got was genuine," a man who was vaccinated at one of the suspected centers said.

India is among the nations worst hit by COVID-19, with over 30.5 million confirmed cases and more than 400,000 deaths. Over 351 million doses of vaccines have been administered in the country, with 59 million people fully vaccinated – just above 4.3% of the population.

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