


WATCH TOWER

Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania

200 Watchtower Drive, Patterson, NY 12563-9205, U.S.A.

ECA:ECH November 9, 2021



Thank you for your letter of September 3, 2021, in which you share some concerns regarding COVID-19 vaccination. In your letter, you express appreciation for the guidance that has been provided by Jehovah's organization. Regarding COVID-19 vaccines, you feel that recent Governing Body update programs on JW Broadcasting® are recommending and encouraging the brothers and sisters to get vaccinated and you ask why this seems to be the case, since, according to your research, they are not proven safe or effective. You also ask about the propriety of accepting a vaccine that involved the use of cells derived from an aborted fetus. We are pleased to provide the following comments.

As was stated in the Governing Body updates, the matter of whether or not to accept a vaccine is a personal decision for each individual to make. (Galatians 6:5) As you acknowledge in your letter, our publications emphasize this principle when they deal with health-care matters. One example is the February 8, 1987, issue of *Awake!*, which states: "[This magazine] does not recommend any one type of medicine or therapy over another and does not offer medical advice. Its aim is simply to present facts and to leave it to the reader to make judgments and decisions." You feel that comments made in the Governing Body updates are in conflict with this principle. However, these updates did not recommend any particular vaccine. Rather, they presented important facts and wise counsel that we do well to consider in our personal decision-making process. For example, the video *2021 Governing Body Update #6* mentioned three such factors, namely: (1) As Jehovah's Witnesses, we do not have a religious objection to vaccination. (2) Over 19,000 of our dear brothers and sisters have died from the COVID-19 virus. (3) In some lands, "the superior authorities" have made laws requiring all their citizens to be vaccinated or they are strongly encouraging their citizens to be vaccinated. (Romans 13:1) After mentioning these three factors, the update stated: "We each must weigh such factors when making our own personal decision. Continue to take reasonable precautions in accord with local conditions, especially if you have health problems or you're up in years. Stay in touch with direction coming from the local health authorities, and be careful."

Some may conclude that since many in the Bethel family have chosen to be vaccinated, others should also choose to do so. However, this is not the basis upon which to make such a personal decision. Why, then, have the update programs mentioned statistics regarding how many in the Bethel family have chosen to be vaccinated? One reason was to emphasize the point that we do not have a religious objection to vaccination. Also, *Update #6* stated that "New York State regulations now allow vaccinated persons to engage in a greater number of activities." So prior to showing the worldwide brotherhood that the Bethel family had resumed certain activities, such as having meals together and gathering together in person for worship, it was important to make clear that the majority of the United States Bethel family members have been vaccinated and thus are in compliance with local laws as they engage in such activities.

Additionally, as you can no doubt appreciate, many have inquired about the welfare of the Bethel family. Throughout the pandemic, in various announcements to all congregations, the Governing Body has

requested that the brotherhood pray for the worldwide Bethel family. Of course, this would include praying for their physical well-being so that the spiritual food could continue to be distributed during the pandemic.

In response to this loving interest, the Governing Body, by means of the update programs, has been able to inform the worldwide brotherhood of the things happening at Bethel during the pandemic. Stating that many at Bethel had chosen to be vaccinated in accord with their wishes was a way of letting the brotherhood know about the welfare of the Bethel family.

We acknowledge that it can be a challenge to make a personal decision about COVID-19 vaccination. Just as when choosing any medical treatment, each one of us is encouraged to act in harmony with Proverbs 14:15. This would involve searching for reliable information. After obtaining such information, each Christian has the responsibility to analyze his or her findings in the light of Bible principles and thereafter make an informed decision. Granted, this is not always easy. There are ongoing research and concerns about the virus, its variants, and the long-term safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines. Additionally, it may be difficult to find reliable information about the COVID-19 pandemic in the midst of all the distorted facts, half-truths, and false news that is so prevalent. Reports may be slanted for or against vaccines because of commercial or political bias. To assist us, the slave has provided timely reminders based on Bible principles. Three examples of this are the articles "Protect Yourself From Misinformation" on jw.org; "Do You Have the Facts?" in *The Watchtower* of August 2018; and "Can You Trust the News Media?" under the subheading "A Need for Balance" on page 7 in *Awake!* of December 2013. The principles in these articles are especially useful when researching COVID-19 vaccines, in view of the mass of information that exists on this subject. One such principle is to "make sure of all things." (1 Thessalonians 5:21) With this principle in mind, the aforementioned jw.org article gives this advice: "Do not trust a news item unless you can check the original source."

To illustrate this point, consider reports about adverse reactions attributed to COVID-19 vaccines, such as those in the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) mentioned in your letter. At times, researchers, media outlets, and others may present VAERS data as conclusive evidence of widespread negative effects of COVID-19 vaccines. However, according to the disclaimers clearly stated on the VAERS website, such data is not intended to be used as evidence of proven side effects of any vaccine. For example, the VAERS website has a disclaimer regarding the reliability of the information it contains. The site says: "The reports may contain information that is incomplete, inaccurate, coincidental, or unverifiable. In large part, reports to VAERS are voluntary, which means they are subject to biases. This creates specific limitations on how the data can be used scientifically. Data from VAERS reports should always be interpreted with these limitations in mind." The site's "Guide to Interpreting VAERS Data" further states: "VAERS collects data on any adverse event following vaccination, be it coincidental or truly caused by a vaccine. The report of an adverse event to VAERS is *not* documentation that a vaccine caused the event." (Italics ours.) It goes on to say: "No proof that the event was caused by the vaccine is required in order for VAERS to accept the report. VAERS accepts all reports without judging whether the event was caused by the vaccine."

So we can see that while certain data sources, such as VAERS, can be very useful in specific ways for scientists and government health officials, these sources have known limitations and are clearly not intended to be used as evidence of proven side effects of any vaccine. Although many of the reported adverse reactions occurred shortly after a COVID-19 vaccine was administered, much additional expert analysis is required to determine if a certain reaction was actually caused by a vaccine or if it was caused by some other health condition and coincidentally occurred sometime after the person received a vaccine. Yet, some researchers, media outlets, and others have misinterpreted and, in some cases, misused such data. Therefore, although it can be helpful to consider certain statistics as a factor in one's personal decision-making process, we must remember that caution is in order when it comes to reports involving such information. We can see the wisdom of the advice mentioned earlier to "check the original source" of a report before reaching personal conclusions about it.

Regarding the use of cell lines produced from cells derived from aborted fetuses, we are aware that many vaccines in use today, including some COVID-19 vaccines, involve these cell lines in their production, such as the cell lines MRC-5, HEK293, and T-REx-293. What factors would a Christian need to consider when deciding whether or not to accept such a vaccine? First, was the abortion arranged with the express purpose of harvesting such cells? If so, then using those cells would make one directly complicit in the willful taking of human life. Second, did the act of taking the desired cells from the fetus actually kill it? If so, that too would make the one using those cells complicit in the willful taking of human life. (See the November 22, 2002, issue of *Awake!*, page 10, paragraph 1.) However, if the fetus was not aborted for the purpose of harvesting any of its cells, or if it was aborted for a purpose other than harvesting cells, then using those cells would not make one complicit in the willful taking of human life.

vesting any of its cells or if it did not die as a direct result of taking them, it would be a personal matter as to whether one might utilize the cells or accept a vaccine that utilized such cells. In some respects, the situation could be compared to that of a Christian who needs an organ transplant and who has to decide whether to accept an organ from the body of a murder victim.—Compare “Questions From Readers” in *The Watchtower* of March 15, 1980, page 31.

In the case of the aborted fetus associated with the production of MRC-5, sources consistently explain that this was not aborted for the purpose of obtaining diploid cells and that the fetal tissue was removed from the fetus when it was already dead. Thus, the abortion was not arranged with the express purpose of harvesting such cells. Similarly, the abortion of the fetus from which the cell line HEK293 (and, by extension, its derivative T-REx-293) was derived was not arranged with the express purpose of vaccine production. And as the term “aborted fetus” implies, the fetus was no longer alive when the cells were extracted. Thus, the matter of whether to accept a vaccine that involved these cell lines in its production is a personal decision for each Christian to make. Of course, since consciences vary, it is expected that various brothers and sisters will sometimes come to different personal decisions in this regard.

In conclusion, because vaccination is a matter of personal decision for each individual, what is said above is not meant to dissuade you from any personal decision you may have made regarding COVID-19 vaccination. Commendably, it is evident from your letter that you are carefully and prayerfully weighing many factors in the matter of vaccination in order to make a well-informed personal decision that leaves you with a clear conscience before Jehovah. Even though making good decisions can be difficult, especially during this pandemic, how grateful we are that Jehovah generously blesses us with wisdom when we look to him! (James 1:5) We pray that Jehovah bless you with peace and strength to continue enduring faithfully during these last of the last days.—Isaiah 26:3.

Please accept our warm Christian love and best wishes.

Your brothers,

Watch Tower B. J. Society
OF PENNSYLVANIA