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[ **inside**view ]



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# WELL PLACED FOR A MEETING OF MINDS

A conversation with **JEROME KIM**, Director General of the International Vaccine Institute (IVI), an international organization made up of 37 member states and the World Health Organization, that develops vaccines for conditions prevalent in low-income countries



The meetings, incentives, conferencing, and exhibitions (MICE) industry suffered a huge blow during COVID-19 as gatherings disappeared. Jerome Kim discusses the possibility of a safe return to such large events amidst global vaccination efforts and the emergence and rapid spread of variants.

**How is the COVID-19 vaccine global supply tracking?**

Vaccine manufacturers will soon be making two billion doses a month. Countries lack the infrastructure, personnel, and the means to dispose of all the needles, syringes, vials, and personal protective equipment involved. People have been exposed to negativity about vaccines, and many live in countries where trust in government is low. Overcoming these barriers to mass vaccination will be the key challenge.

**What do you think about the current disease control measures or quarantine system for hosting face-to-face meetings in South Korea?**

South Korea is still managing COVID-19 very carefully. I've attended some events with 100 to 200 people, which is a lot these days, and huge efforts are going into preventing infections onsite. Seats have space between them, and everyone wears a mask. There are filters on the microphones, which they change between speakers. Everyone registers with their phone number, so the organisers can easily warn people if another attendee tests positive afterwards.

Quarantine requirements remain a big issue, but are starting to show signs of positive change. Rules were recently

relaxed for vaccinated residents of South Korea who can go free if they test negative on arrival. Starting from April, travellers who have been fully vaccinated overseas and registered their vaccination proof with South Korea's Q-Code website will be able to enter the country without a seven-day quarantine period.

**What preparations or measures are needed for life to move on with COVID-19?**

We are now critically dependent on countries around the world agreeing on systems and approaches that will allow life to carry on. We have all the elements we need, but they aren't working in sync. Governments can't keep insisting that they don't recognize vaccination cards from X or Y country. In South Korea, vaccination certificates have a QR code, which you scan at each venue, and if the light flashes green you're good to go. We need to figure out how to do this for everyone. We know where the majority of new conference visitors come from, and should try to establish the relationships needed to rapidly generate vaccine passports that work within the South Korean system. The European Union's digital COVID certificate is a great example, as it's verifiable and traceable across all member states.

But, we are also going to need to accept a certain amount of risk, just as we do with the flu, whereby we encourage everyone to get vaccinated, and then boosted each year, knowing that some people are going to become infected. Countries will increasingly be able to estimate the risks and design control programmes that minimize those risks, or manage them.

**What do you think is South Korea's strength as an event destination?**

South Korea prides itself on its technology, and conferences run amazingly smoothly, even with thousands of participants joining online. Every event is meticulously organized with great attention to detail, so there is never any hassle with registration or finding your way around. I've been to so many conferences that are all business, but South Korea does a great job of exposing visitors to its culture, whether through dances and dresses, or a traditional dinner. The cities are also very clean and safe, and public transport is easy to navigate, with signs in English, Japanese, and Chinese.

**How does IVI contribute to global public health?**

IVI's mission is to create vaccines and then help small companies in developing countries manufacture, market and distribute them. When the

pandemic began, we decided not to create our own vaccine, and instead help any company that came to us with theirs. We tested these early vaccines in animals, to see whether they created an immune response and protected against infection, performed clinical trials, and then helped generate evidence for WHO approved vaccines. Those companies we are working with whose vaccines are in Phase III trials have committed 1.2 billion doses to COVAX, the WHO project increasing global access to vaccines.

**What was the most impressive convention or conference held in South Korea?**

In 2019, the International Vaccine Forum brought about 1,000 people to Hwasun, about 300 km south of Seoul. It was an exciting and cultural event that brought together an incredible mix of students, professionals, Nobel prize winners, faculty members and renowned vaccinologists. The event also marked the opening of a new bacterial manufacturing pilot plant there — part of South Korea's mission to become 80% self-sufficient in vaccine production.



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