

# Vaccinations increase but hesitancy worries private sector

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While corporate Trinidad and Tobago is making strides in vaccinating tens of thousands of people against COVID-19, vaccine hesitancy continues to be a worry.

Over the past week, thousands of people got vaccinated at the Manufacturers' Association (TTMA), Supermarket Association (SATT), American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham T&T), Proman and the Couva Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce (CPLCC) sites up to Sunday.

CPLCC president Mukesh Ramsingh yesterday said the chamber began its vaccination programme last Friday at the Nal Ramsingh Auditorium in Couva. It administered approximately 5,000 first doses to chamber employees, workers of member companies and the public through appointments and walk-ins. From August 7, the CPLCC will administer second doses.

But Ramsingh said there is a need for more people to get vaccinated, as there was still too much hesitancy. He said this is because people are relying on information from conspiracy theorists on social media.

"In terms of operations, we went very smoothly. Again, it just comes back to the people not coming out for the vaccines. Some companies that booked 100 persons, maybe 50 per cent actually showed up for the vaccine," Ramsingh said.

While the CPLCC can vaccinate more people, he acknowledged that there were other locations.



Sabita Pragg gets her COVID-19 jab from Dr Jevon Rush as Dr Kodi Lourenco, left, looks on during the CPLCC's mass vaccination drive at Camden, Couva, recently. PICTURE SHASTRI BOODAN

The SATT is meanwhile close to administering 50,000 doses of the vaccine. SATT director Maria Mohammed-Maharaj said there will be stock taking tomorrow to determine the exact figures for the first and second doses, since they started vaccinations on June 8. The SATT vaccinated 13,000 supermarket and pharmacy workers and members of the Diabetes Association with two doses by July 11.

SATT vaccinations continue tomorrow and Thursday for people wanting their first dose of the vaccine at the Centre Point Mall in Chaguanas. The SATT will accept

walk-ins between 9 am and 4 pm on those days.

Mohammed-Maharaj agreed there is still some hesitancy among workers in the sector. However, supermarkets that sent some of their staff to the SATT's first vaccination programme are now sending more.

"Some of the same stores and chains are still sending their employees who saw that their colleagues got vaccinated and want to come aboard. But there is still hesitancy among staff," Mohammed-Maharaj said.

The SATT expanded its programme to include retail, supply,

nightclubs, restaurants, bars, food services, religious groups and non-governmental organisations (NGO). Mohammed-Maharaj said a lot of people from NGOs, and retail stores responded.

One retail chain sent 1,500 workers, while another sent its entire staff.

Last week, AmCham T&T vaccinated approximately 7,000 people with their first doses. AmCham T&T CEO Nirad Tewarie yesterday said while some people do not want to take vaccines, it was difficult to determine the level of hesitancy. Tewarie said some people were also specific about which

brand they would take.

"What I also found is there are people who are coming, who were not sure about the vaccine. They did their reading and now realise that it is better to be vaccinated than unvaccinated," Tewarie said.

Like Mohammed-Maharaj, he also saw the confidence some people got when someone they know got vaccinated. Tewarie said he saw one of his former primary school teachers volunteering and posting a photograph on social media.

"She told me several people who were hesitant had responded and were now interested in getting the vaccine."

AmCham T&T will continue to administer first doses for the next two weeks. While there were photographs on social media with empty chairs last week at the National Academy for Performing Arts site, he said people should not mistake efficiency for underutilisation. He said the process was so quick that there was no gathering of people.

The TTMA said it has now reached 30,000 people in its vaccination campaign.

In partnership with the Medical Association, SEWA TT International and the National Council of Indian Culture, the TTMA vaccinated workers and the public at 11 mass vaccination sites.

President Tricia Coosal said the TTMA was elated over the continued public-private partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

## After year long delay due to COVID, 30 benefit from free eye surgery

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Benjamin Skinner's eyes operate at a 10 per cent capacity, making him legally visually impaired. As he sat in the waiting room of the Good Health Medical Centre in Port-of-Spain yesterday, he told Guardian Media of his humble expectations following his procedure.

"If I could get it to 20 per cent I'll take that! I'm not a young boy!"

Skinner was one of 30 people who yesterday received free cataract and vitrectomy procedures courtesy the Trinidad Eye Hospital (TEH) and the Caribbean Vitreous & Retina Surgery Limited (CVRS).

Calling it "Christmas in July," the clinics chose people who could not afford the \$12,000 procedure and whose eyes needed urgent attention. This initiative has been ongoing since 2016. However last year, due to COVID-19 pandemic,



Surgical services associate Anisa Thomas, right, escorts Sharran Seepersad after she received her cataract surgery during the Trinidad Eye Hospital Gift of Sight charity cataract surgery drive at the Good Health Medical Centre in Port-of-Spain yesterday. PICTURE ANISTO ALVES

it was postponed.

This year, the clinics said they were thrilled to have sponsors willing to ensure people get the surgeries they need but cannot afford.

TEH Stakeholder Engagement Manager Franka Mohammed said many people become visually impaired because they simply lack the funds for surgical procedures. "They postpone their surger-

ies, maybe they are on a waiting list in the hospital and they are constantly worrying because they have no funds. When they come to the clinic and we assess them, we put them on the list based on the severity of their vision. Today (yesterday), patients are leaving with a sense of relief. The pandemic has put us into an economic crisis but these people are going to feel some joy," she said.

Mohammed said cataract is the second leading cause of blindness globally.

"Some people don't even see to eat their breakfast because it's so blurry."

This year, the clinics partnered with the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago (DATTT), which is quite the apt combination according to the DATTT president Andrew Dhanoo, who said that diabetes is the leading cause of blindness. Dhanoo said in reaching out to some of their members, the association made a startling discovery.

"We would have gone around the country doing testing and we tested around 600 people and what we were able to detect, is that 50 per cent of people living with diabetes or more have some form of eye disease. So it's a huge number and most of these people have never had an eye test before, so the DATTT and TEH will soon be going around the country and offering free eye tests," Dhanoo explained.

Meanwhile, the TEH is hoping to add more free surgeries in the future.

What started as an annual project in 2016 has blossomed into a bi-annual affair. Mohammed said now, the goal is to have sessions like the one yesterday at least three times for the year.

For patients like Benjamin Skinner, days like yesterday make his heart soar.

"I'm elated and I hope through God they can continue their work," Skinner told Guardian Media.