

About Those Vaccine ID Cards...

By [Charles Hugh Smith](#)

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An idea that's simple as an abstraction—vaccine ID cards—turns out to be extremely difficult once real-world operational realities must be dealt with.

Authorities around the world have made it clear that they will do “whatever it takes” to vaccinate their citizenry with one of the first available vaccines. Authoritarian states may mandate universal vaccinations while less authoritarian states will favor a “carrot and stick” approach of offering benefits to the vaccinated and exclusions from employment, education, travel and most of everyday life for those who refuse to be vaccinated.

To identify the vaccinated and unvaccinated, many nations are planning to issue ID cards or “vaccine passports.” As an abstraction, this seems straightforward, but if we start digging into the actual operational requirements of this mass ID card issuance and distribution, a number of common-sense issues arise.

[Vaccination cards will be issued to everyone getting Covid-19 vaccine, health officials say](#) (CNN)

First and foremost, it's unknown how long the immunity offered by the vaccines will last. It's still early days, so there is conflicting evidence: some claim the vaccines will be longer-lasting than the natural immunity of those who caught the virus and recovered, while other evidence suggests the immunity might decay after six months. Despite claims that natural immunity is long-lasting, a non-trivial number of people who had Covid have been re-infected.

Nobody knows how long either natural or vaccine immunity will last because not enough time has elapsed to collect sufficient data.

Given these intrinsic unknowns, how long will the ID card be valid? It's easy to imagine variations in individual responses such that the vaccines' effectiveness decays more rapidly in 20% of the vaccinated. This variability would introduce tremendous unknowns that no ID card could reflect: is the holder of the card at Month 10 still immune or not?

If the duration of the vaccine's effectiveness is variable, then an ID card could be misleading. In other words, being vaccinated with a variable-duration vaccine tells us nothing about the individual's actual immunity down the road.

Given these unknowns, the vaccinated may need booster shots in the future, and the ID cards would have to be re-issued. The task of keeping track of hundreds of

millions of vaccination records, identities and then issuing ID cards is a non-trivial task.

To thwart black-market fake-ID cards, the security measures will have to be equivalent to a driver's license or passport. Have you applied recently for either of these forms of ID? The process is painfully slow. The systems in place to process state drivers' licenses and U.S. passports are already strained, and which agency is prepared to verify the identity of 280 million adult citizens, confirm the validity of their vaccine and then issue ID cards—and then repeat this process in a year?

If the procedures for issuing vaccine ID cards are slapdash due to time constraints—for example, downloading a digital record from the vaccine distributor or a printed card—these will likely be vulnerable to being duplicated or spoofed. Fake vaccine distributors will pop up issuing bogus digital records, hackers might download and sell digital records from trusted sources, and so on.

Then there's the extra burdens being placed on the staff of airlines, cruise lines, etc. to scan these documents and deal with rejected cards. Who will have the legal authority to deal with claims that a rejected card is actually valid? How many smaller establishments simply won't have to staff to do more than glance at the card?

Do authorities have the means to issue hundreds of millions of absolutely secure vaccine ID cards and then monitor all the attempts to find loopholes and weaknesses in the process? If authorities think that strict penalties will limit this activity, they underestimate the difficulty in getting such penalties enforced by overloaded court systems.

In nations with strong traditions of civil liberties, there will be pushback against mandatory vaccinations with essentially untested vaccines and against national databases tying identity to vaccination cards—a situation ripe with potential for abuse.

Authorities don't seem to grasp that many of those hesitating to get vaccinated are not anti-vaxxers; they simply see the vaccine approval process as deeply flawed for common-sense reasons: for example, *there is simply not enough data on safety, duration and real-world efficacy.*

Authorities are counting on the "carrot" of air travel, cruises and concerts to persuade skeptics to get vaccinated despite their concerns. What authorities don't seem to realize is that a great many people value their health, privacy and agency far more than they crave air travel, cruises or concerts. They will gladly forego all these activities until more reliable data is collected, peer-reviewed and distributed for analysis.

The more draconian the measures designed to pressure people into getting the vaccines, the greater the reluctance of skeptics who see the draconian measures as additional evidence the vaccines are half-measures being forced on the populace as a means of imposing a false assurance that all is well and "normal" will return as soon as the skeptics cave in and get vaccinated.

There's also the possibility that the virus could mutate in ways that moot the vaccines' effectiveness. While this is widely considered unlikely, it's not impossible, either. If a mutated virus arises that evades the vaccine, then what value will the vaccine ID card have?

An idea that's simple as an abstraction-vaccine ID cards-turns out to be extremely difficult once real-world operational realities must be dealt with. The fact is the first vaccines have been rushed to approval with virtually none of the testing demanded of previous vaccines raises common-sense concerns which cannot be dissolved with force or carrots and sticks.

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