

5th Sunhak Peace Prize Award Ceremony: Two years ago, it would have never had occurred to me that I might be considered for such an award

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Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, Chairman Barroso, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen: It is a very great honor to be selected to receive the SunHak Peace Prize and to follow on from the prestigious laureates who have received the award in previous years.

Two years ago, it would have never had occurred to me that I might be considered for such an award. I am a scientist working at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, and for some years my research has been on the development of vaccines against viruses that are known to cause outbreaks.

I had been part of a team that worked on the rapid clinical development of a vaccine against Ebola in 2014, when the largest outbreak of that disease that is known to us occurred in West Africa. Vaccine development moved quickly at first, but then paused whilst decisions were made on the next steps to be taken. Opportunities to test more than one vaccine for protective efficacy were lost.

From my place on the team, I was able to observe what had gone well, and where delays had crept in. I took note of the importance of planning many steps ahead, should we ever find ourselves in a similar situation.

At the very beginning of 2020, I began to respond to reports of a new virus that was causing disease and spreading rapidly. As the virus spread, our team grew; our vaccine was produced, tested and eventually licensed for emergency use. I had the great privilege to work with many experts, all using their knowledge and experience, along with an incredible amount of hard work, to make the vaccine widely available as fast as we could.

Our partners AstraZeneca agreed to produce the vaccine without profit during the pandemic, and to continue with that pricing strategy in low and middle income countries even after the pandemic ends. Vaccine production has taken place in many countries around the world with the aim of maximizing the supply, and the benefit that the vaccine can bring. It is now in use in at least 170 countries, and over 2.5 billion doses have been produced.

By now, more than sixty percent of the world's population has received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine.

Now that large numbers of many different vaccines are available, there is still more to do to assist with the deployment of vaccines in all countries. But for many of us, we can now look forward to our lives returning to normal as the impact of the pandemic reduces. Except we cannot simply go back to normal as if the last two years did not take place.

Again, we must learn from what worked, and what did not. We must increase the number of manufacturing facilities across the world as part of ensuring a more equitable supply of vaccines in the future. We must continue to develop technologies in disease surveillance and diagnostics as well as vaccines.

During the pandemic there have been examples of highly beneficial international collaborations, not least in the phase III trials of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which took place in many countries around the world.

Wherever we live, whatever our income and whatever our political views, we must understand that viruses do not recognize these differences, and that no-one is safe until we are all safe.

We must continue to work together to strengthen our defenses, not against each other, but against our common enemy; the pathogenic micro-organisms that can cause harm. We can achieve so much when we work together, each bringing our different strengths. The work we did to produce the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine was exhausting and overwhelming at times, but ultimately vital and rewarding.

I hope that many young people will be inspired in their career choice by knowing about what we achieved, and that governments and international organizations will work together to ensure that next time we need to respond to a disease threat, we will be better prepared than we were in 2020.