

Philippines plans to sue Sanofi over dengue vaccine: minister (Update)

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The Philippines intends to sue Sanofi after authorities suspended the pharmaceutical giant's anti-dengue vaccine in response to the company warning the drug could lead to severe infections in some cases, the health secretary said Thursday.

Regulators froze the Philippines' world-first public dengue immunisation programme last week and suspended all sales of the vaccine on Monday after Sanofi said Dengvaxia could worsen symptoms for vaccinated people who contracted the disease for the first time.

"Eventually it's the court of law that is going to decide in so far as the liability of Sanofi is concerned," Health Secretary Francisco Duque said on ABS-CBN television

The previous administration of president Benigno Aquino launched the vaccination programme last year, making the Philippines the first nation to use Dengvaxia on a mass scale.

About 830,000 schoolchildren had received at least one dose of the vaccine, Duque said on Thursday. Previously the government said more than 733,000 people had been vaccinated.

Sanofi's announcement last week caused great concern in the Philippines—where the mosquito-born disease is extremely prevalent.

The French company on Monday sought to allay concerns, saying

Dengvaxia would not cause anyone who was immunised to die and would not cause a dengue infection.

However, Duque said Thursday Sanofi's recent statements on Dengvaxia were "confusing".

Duque said he may ask Sanofi to refund 1.4 billion pesos (\$27.6 million) worth of unused Dengvaxia supplies.

He added the government might also demand Sanofi set up an "indemnity fund" to cover the hospitalisation cost for children vaccinated under the public programme who would fall ill.

Asked if the government would sue Sanofi if allegations of a lack of transparency were proved, Duque said: "I'm sure it's going to get there".

He added: "If it's found out that (Sanofi) withheld material information that would have changed the outcome of all of these problems and the decision makers of the Department of Health in the previous administration, then they are liable."

Duque said congressional hearings into the issue would start next week.

Sanofi said Thursday it was surprised by Duque's remarks, adding it would continue to comply with Philippine authorities' legal directives.

"Sanofi is a responsible company that has acted according to Philippine laws and regulations for the supply and sale of the vaccine according to the approved label in the country," the company said in a statement emailed to AFP.

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