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Sanofi urges Philippines to lift dengue vaccine suspension

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French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi on Monday urged the Philippines to lift the suspension of its anti-dengue vaccine, insisting it was safe, but the government accused the firm of "dishonesty".

Sales of Dengvaxia and a landmark public immunisation programme using the vaccine were suspended by the Philippines this month after Sanofi warned it could lead to "severe" symptoms for people who had not previously been infected with dengue.

But the company's regional head said on Monday that removing the vaccine from the Philippine market did the public a "disservice", as it was safe and effective for most Filipinos.

"That will be a regression in the country's approach in solving a major public health concern and a disservice to the Filipino people," Thomas Triomphe, Sanofi Pasteur's head of Asia-Pacific, said at a senate hearing in the capital Manila.

"Doing so would in effect leave 90 percent of the population at the mercy of an epidemic which has been found to be preventable," Triomphe added, referring to health department figures on the number of Filipinos who contract dengue.

In late November, Sanofi released findings of a new study that it said showed Dengvaxia could lead to severe infections for vaccinated people who caught the disease for the first time.

The vaccination programme was launched last year by the administration of previous president Benigno Aquino, 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 under the public programme while 32,000 patients were vaccinated in private hospitals, Health Secretary Francisco Duque said on Monday.

During the senate hearing, Duque accused Sanofi officials of "mental dishonesty" about the vaccine's effectiveness, saying he doubted their assurances.

"I think they have not been forthright from the beginning," Duque said.

"My index of suspicion is so high. I am pregnant with doubt. We should not allow this. We are talking about the lives of children."

Medical experts who were part of an advisory body to the health department told the inquiry they had recommended only "phased implementation" of the vaccine and not mass immunisation, pending further clinical trials.

Responding to questions from senators, the experts said the launch of the public vaccination programme was "premature".

Senator Richard Gordon, head of the committee leading the probe, said the government had approved the public immunisation programme with "undue haste" and without sufficient preparation.

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