

New blow to French vaccine effort with Pasteur setback

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French efforts to develop a COVID-19 vaccine suffered a fresh blow on Monday when the renowned Pasteur Institute in Paris abandoned its best hope for an effective jab following disappointing trial results.

The Paris-based research facility, named after 19th-century pioneer Louis Pasteur, had teamed up with US pharmaceutical giant Merck in May last year to develop a jab based on an existing measles [vaccine](#).

Pasteur and Merck jointly announced that they were stopping further development together "following an analysis of the intermediate results obtained from phase I trials, which began in August 2020."

Merck said it had abandoned research on a second [coronavirus](#) vaccine as well.

The news was a setback to global efforts to end the global pandemic, but was a particular disappointment in France where complaints about the lack of a home-made vaccine have been heard in recent weeks.

The country's leading pharmaceutical company, Sanofi announced in late December that its jab would only be ready by the end of 2021 at best.

The group is now being encouraged by the government to help produce rival vaccines that have already been authorized for use in Europe or are in the latter stages of the testing pipeline.

Lost pride?

The global race for a COVID-19 vaccine has seen scientists and countries compete with each other to bring a product to market, with governments pouring billions into research.

Authorized vaccines developed by Pfizer-BioNTech (US-German) and Moderna (US) are dominant in North America, Europe, Israel and the Gulf.

Britain's AstraZeneca-Oxford is used in much of the UK and India, with

the latter also using a domestic vaccine by Bharat Biotech.

Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and two vaccines from China, Sinopharm and Sinovac, are being used across a dozen countries, but they have yet to be fully approved.

In France, which takes pride in Pasteur's world-leading 19th century vaccine research, some politicians have highlighted the failure of the country and the European Union to produce their own vaccine.

BioNtech is a German firm, founded by two researchers of Turkish origin, but it partnered with American giant Pfizer to commercialize and produce its innovative inoculation.

"The problem is that we don't have a European vaccine. I think that Europe should have had this same ambition," former French health minister and right-wing opposition politician Xavier Bertrand told the France Inter radio station recently.

Francois Ruffin from the left-wing France Unbowed party has pointed fingers at Sanofi and successive governments, accusing them of "smashing a technological and healthcare asset"

"I want a French vaccine, with French technology," he told the BFM news channel in mid-January.

"Why haven't we got one? We need to explain it to the French people."

A report by the French think-tank Terra Nova last week said public financial support for vaccine research and development was one of the crucial factors.

The US government under ex-president Donald Trump mobilized 10

billion dollars for its Operation Warp Speed initiative to support vaccine research, while the European Union put together three billion dollars.

"The EU was not able to put as much money on the table as the United States," said the report entitled "Vaccine Production: What are the lessons of the COVID-19 experience?"

Furthermore, US funding for vaccine research had increased dramatically this century, while European investment has fallen, author Anne Bucher wrote.

Future hopes

Both the Pasteur Institute and Merck said they were working on other COVID-19 vaccines which are in preliminary stages and not yet ready for [clinical trials](#).

The decision to abandon its COVID vaccine based on a measles jab "does not have any impact on the continuation of research by the Pasteur Institute into two other vaccine candidates which use different methodologies", it said.

The private, non-profit foundation, which has about 2,000 researchers, has two other candidates.

One is being developed in partnership with French biotech firm TheraVectys that can be administered nasally, and a second in-house effort using the same novel RNA technology developed by BioNTech and Moderna.

Merck said it would focus its efforts on treatments for the virus.

One of these therapeutics, MK-7110, helps reduce inflammation caused

by the virus and interim clinical results showed a more than 50 percent reduction in the risk of death or respiratory failure in patients with severe COVID-19, Merck said.

Merck expects initial clinical data in the first quarter of 2021 on the other therapeutic, an antiviral agent, the company said.

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