

AstraZeneca plans higher COVID vaccine output for EU

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AstraZeneca plans to accelerate production of its COVID vaccine in the second quarter to support EU needs, the British pharmaceutical giant said Wednesday, announcing a deal with Germany's IDT Biologika.

The announcement follows controversy over deliveries of the AstraZeneca-Oxford University jab to the European Union, which had

caused tensions between the bloc and the pharmaceutical company.

Ahead of the EU's vaccine approval, AstraZeneca sparked fury among European leaders by announcing that it would miss its target of supplying the EU with 400 million doses, due to a shortfall at the firm's European plants.

While the UK government has vaccinated millions of Britons with the AstraZeneca vaccine since late last year, the company began shipping its jab to the EU only on Friday after the bloc's drug regulator took its time over recommending its use.

"Following the European Medicines Agency approval, millions of AstraZeneca vaccines began shipping on 5 February as part of the initial 17 million doses that are due to be delivered over the next weeks, with more planned in March," AstraZeneca said in the statement outlining plans to step up production.

"AstraZeneca and IDT Biologika are exploring options to accelerate output of finished COVID-19 vaccine AstraZeneca in the second quarter of 2021 in order to help support Europe's immediate vaccination needs during the pandemic," the statement added.

The company's chief executive Pascal Soriot said the agreement "will greatly help Europe build an independent vaccine manufacturing capability that will allow it to meet the challenges of the current pandemic and create strategic supply capacity for the future".

He thanked the German government and European Commission for "their support".

Beyond the immediate need for more vaccines, the agreement will see both companies invest to increase capacity at a production site in

Dessau, eastern Germany, to produce millions of doses monthly by the end of 2022.

The deal could allow also for the manufacturing of coronavirus vaccines produced by other pharmaceutical companies.

The plans will give IDT Biologika some of the largest vaccine manufacturing capacities in Europe, the statement said.

"We are proud that AstraZeneca has chosen us as a strategic partner for the manufacturing of their vaccines," said IDT Biologika chief executive Jurgen Betzing, adding that it was "a great day for Germany and Europe".

Vaccine setbacks

The AstraZeneca vaccine has garnered praise for its low cost relative to rivals and the ease of storage. A regular refrigerator can be used to store the vaccine.

But it has suffered a number of setbacks in recent weeks.

The jab was temporarily excluded from South Africa's immunisation campaign over questions about its effectiveness against a new strain of the disease first identified in the country.

There have also been concerns in some parts of Europe over using the AstraZeneca vaccine on the elderly.

But on Wednesday, World Health Organization vaccine experts recommended the AstraZeneca jab for use on people aged over 65 and in settings where variants of the virus are circulating.

The 15-member Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization issued a range of interim recommendations for when and how to use the two-shot vaccine, which has yet to receive emergency use authorisation from the WHO.

Last week meanwhile saw a separate Anglo-German collaboration announced, with Britain's GlaxoSmithKline and Germany's CureVac teaming up to develop a vaccine that can potentially counter multiple variants of COVID-19.

The pair hope to have a vaccine by next year, subject to regulatory approval.

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