

Vaccine production must catch up to science: EU chief

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Europe's race to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines must accelerate to

catch up to scientific breakthroughs and outpace emerging variants, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said on Wednesday.

"We underestimated the difficulty related to mass production. Normally, it takes five to 10 years to produce a new [vaccine](#). We did it in 10 months. This is a huge scientific success, and we should be rightly proud—but in a way, science has outstripped industry," she told the European Parliament.

In her first public admission to Europeans—outside of some select media interviews—von der Leyen said her Commission had made missteps in procuring vaccines on behalf all EU countries.

But she defended the overall strategy.

"We were late to authorise. We were too optimistic when it came to massive production. And perhaps we were too confident that what we ordered would actually be delivered on time," she said.

But to have allowed Europe's wealthiest countries to grab vaccines for themselves and leave others in the cold "would have been, I think, the end of our community," she said.

'We got it right'

There were lessons to be learnt, von der Leyen said, and her Commission would do so.

They included getting more data shared between clinics in EU countries, improving regulations to allow the European Medicines Agency to move faster in authorising vaccines, and especially to clear industrial bottlenecks to vaccine production.

"Industry must adapt to the pace of science," she said, noting that vaccines can contain as many as 400 ingredients and manufacturing involve as many as 100 companies.

A vaccine production task force under internal market commissioner Thierry Breton was charged with that mission, she said.

"We're dealing with completely new mRNA vaccines never manufactured at scale before. One of the current bottlenecks is, for example, linked to synthetic molecules... we need more coordination on the supply of key ingredients."

Von der Leyen warned that European scientists do not yet know if the vaccines will be effective against new mutant strains of the virus that are emerging.

"But we do know these variants will continue to emerge. And we do know that we need to anticipate and prepare immediately," she warned.

She also said deeply regretted an aborted bid by the Commission last month to try to restrict vaccines being transported into Britain's territory of Northern Ireland as part of a bitter row with Anglo-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, which has failed to deliver vaccine doses it promised to the EU.

But she stressed that "in the end, we got it right" and a hastily set-up EU vaccine export control scheme would not "restrict companies that are honouring their contracts with the European Union" and vaccines to most of the bloc's neighbours would be unhindered.

The Commission, she emphasised, "will do its utmost to protect the peace of Northern Ireland, just as it has done throughout the entire Brexit process".

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