

Austria targets hard-hit area with shots to battle variant

March 11 2021, by David Rising



In this Monday, Jan. 4, 2021 file photo, frozen vials of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine are taken out to thaw, at the MontLegia CHC hospital in Liege, Belgium. The European Commission has secured an agreement with Pfizer-BioNTech for an extra 4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to tackle a surge of coronavirus clusters that have prompted border restrictions. The doses are expected to be delivered before the end of March. The EU's executive arm is worried by the worsening situation in several areas, mainly due to the spread of new variants. It also does not want virus clusters to prompt more border

restrictions. The EU has cited Tyrol in Austria, Nice and Moselle in France, Bolzano in Italy and some parts of Bavaria and Saxony in Germany as places where COVID-19 hospitalizations have been on the rise. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco, File)

Austria embarked on an ambitious drive Thursday to inoculate residents of a district that has been particularly hard-hit by the virus variant first found in South Africa, a move that is part of a research project into vaccinations.

Around 48,500 of the 64,000 people eligible for vaccinations in Tyrol province's Schwaz district have signed up to get shots and the goal is to have them all done by Monday, Schwaz Mayor Hand Lintner told reporters. A second shot will be given four weeks later.

The district, east of the provincial capital of Innsbruck and home to about 84,000 people, has been a source of concern for weeks.

It has seen the majority of the cases of the more transmissible variant in the province, peaking at 193 active confirmed cases of it, before dropping down to a current 47, authorities said.

In addition to protecting the people of Schwaz, the idea of the program, overseen in part by the Medical University of Innsbruck, is to collect data on how well the vaccine protects people and in particular how effective it is on the South African variant.

"For us here today, it is a day of joy," Lintner said.

In preparation for the drive, the district has received a special tranche of 100,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine from the European

Union. It is being administered at 26 different facilities set up in the area's 39 municipalities.

At one, inside a multi-use city building, medical professionals are working from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. seeing to seven different lines of patients, from each of which at least 20 people per hour can be vaccinated, Lintner said.

"I'm convinced we'll manage it," he said.

In addition to local experts, national and international medical and virology observers are on hand for the program, officials said.

Tyrol state's governor, Guenther Platter, said in addition to helping learn more about the science of the vaccines, the program is also a window into the logistical workings of a mass inoculation program.

He said with many vaccine doses on order and more varieties in development or waiting approval, "we're hopeful we'll get more doses in the coming weeks."

"We're prepared when we get considerably more vaccine, and this action in Schwaz is a good example," he said.

Austria has seen more than 475,000 cases of COVID-19 with nearly 8,600 deaths, according to the World Health Organization. More than 650,000 vaccine doses have been administered in the country of almost 9 million people.

Germany's eastern state of Saxony is preparing to also offer vaccines to all adults in Vogtland county, an infection hotspot on the border with the Czech Republic. Authorities gave the go-ahead this week to temporarily lift rules that prioritized giving the shots to older people.

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