

Tactical shift: Europe seeks vaccine 'overdrive' to catch up

March 3 2021, by Frank Jordans



In this file photo dated Monday, Dec. 7, 2020, cabins of a vaccine center that was introduced to the media are seen in Wiesbaden, Germany. With accusations of being slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject. With its national vaccine campaign lagging far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States, there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch or rewrite the rulebook. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, FILE)

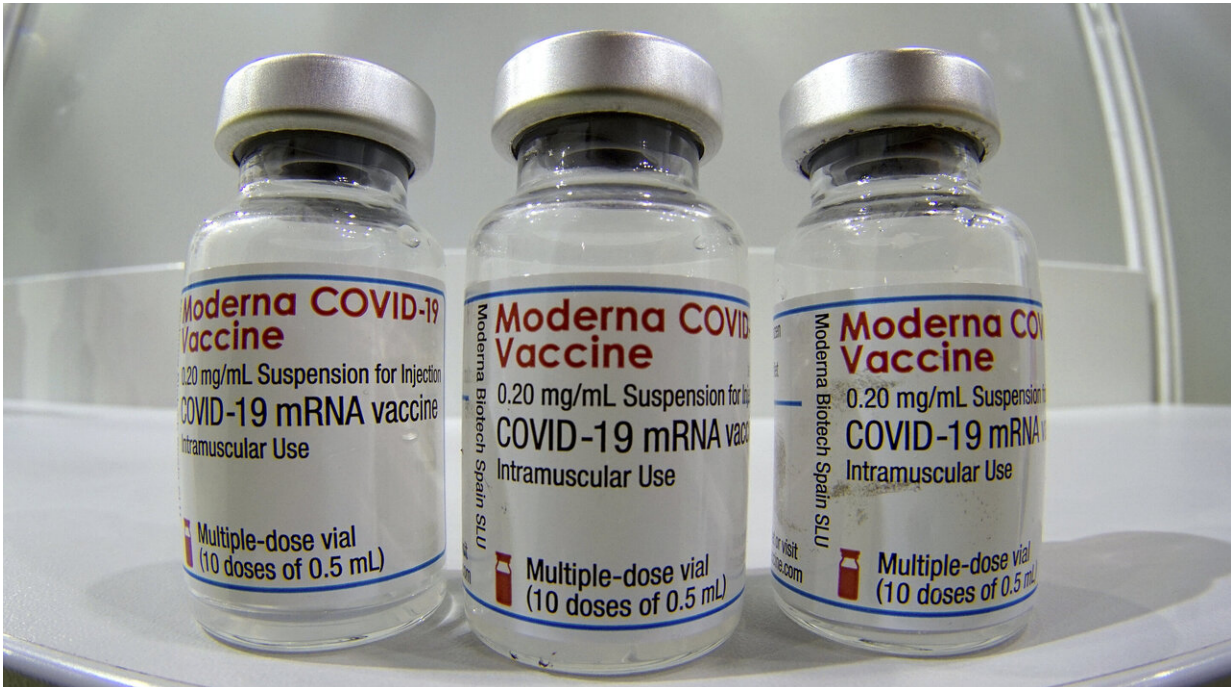
Slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces an unfamiliar problem: a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject them into.

Like other countries in the European Union, its national vaccine campaign lags far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States. Now there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch the rulebook, or at least rewrite it a bit.

Germans watched with morbid fascination in January as Britain trained an army of volunteers to deliver coronavirus shots, then marveled that the U.K.—hit far worse by the pandemic than Germany—managed to vaccinate more than half a million people on some days.

The U.S. drive-thru inoculation centers and the COVID-19 shots given out in American grocery store pharmacies drew bafflement in Germany—that is, until the country's own plans for orderly vaccine appointments at specialized centers were overwhelmed by the demand.

"Anglo-Saxon countries had a much more pragmatic approach," said Hans-Martin von Gaudecker, a professor of economics at the University of Bonn. "What normally makes German bureaucracy stolid and reliable becomes an obstacle in a crisis and costs lives."



In this file photo dated Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021, three vials of the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine are pictured in a new coronavirus vaccination center at the 'Velodrom' (velodrome-stadium) in Berlin, Germany. Slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, FILE)

The European Medicines Agency approved the AstraZeneca vaccine for all age groups, but several EU nations, including Germany, imposed tighter age limits.

With its stockpile of AstraZeneca vaccine doses set to top 2 million, Germany is looking to make more people eligible for the shots that have so far been restricted to a fraction of the population: people in the top priority group who are under 65.

France changed tactics earlier this week, allowing some people over 65 to get the AstraZeneca vaccine after initially restricting its use to younger people. Health Minister Olivier Veran said the shot would soon also be available to people over 50 with health problems that make them more vulnerable.

France, which at more than 87,000 dead has among the highest coronavirus tolls in Europe, had used only 25% of the 1.6 million AstraZeneca vaccines it has received as of Tuesday.



In this file photo dated Saturday, Feb. 13, 2021, a view of the BioNTech biotechnology building where production of the COVID-19 vaccine has started, in Marburg, Germany. Slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and

not enough arms to inject. With its national vaccine campaign lagging far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States, there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch or rewrite the rulebook.(AP Photo/Michael Probst, FILE)

European nations' age restrictions on AstraZeneca compounded problems caused by initial delivery delays and some public reticence toward the vaccine.

Yet data this week from England's mass vaccination program showed that both AstraZeneca and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine were around 60% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 in people over 70 after just a single dose. The analysis released by Public Health England, which hasn't been peer reviewed yet, also showed that both vaccines were about 80% effective in preventing hospitalizations among people over 80.

Belgium and Italy, too, are loosening their age restrictions for the AstraZeneca vaccine as they scramble to confront a looming third spike in COVID-19 cases driven by more contagious virus variants.

In Italy, Premier Mario Draghi's new government ousted the COVID-19 emergency czar this week and put an army general with expertise in logistics and experience in Afghanistan and Kosovo in charge of the country's vaccination program.



In this file photo dated Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, front left, walks past Helge Braun, Head of the Chancellery, right, as she arrives for the weekly cabinet meeting in Berlin, Germany. Slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject. With its national vaccine campaign lagging far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States, there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch or rewrite the rulebook. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, FILE)

Denmark, meanwhile, stands out as an EU vaccination success story. The Scandinavian nation leads the bloc's vaccination tables along with tiny Malta and expects to vaccinate all adults by July—far ahead of the EU goal of 70% of adults vaccinated by September.

Rather than hold back doses for the required second shot, Danish health authorities followed the British model of using all available vaccines as they came in—an approach more EU countries are now considering.

And all of Denmark's 6 million people have digital health records linked to a single ID number, allowing authorities to pinpoint exactly who is eligible for vaccination and reach out to them directly. British authorities also text people directly to set up shots.

"There are historical reasons why we don't have a centralized register like in Denmark," said von Gaudecker, citing Germany's grim history of state oppression under Nazism and Communism.



In this file photo dated Sunday, Dec. 27, 2020, staff waiting for the start of the vaccination against the COVID-19 disease at the Arena Treptow vaccine center

in Berlin, Germany. Slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject. With its national vaccine campaign lagging far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States, there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch or rewrite the rulebook.(AP Photo/Markus Schreiber, FILE)

"Of course a state can do terrible things with data," he said. "But it can also potentially do great things with data."

Better targeting available doses for those who need them is one way European countries hope to stay ahead of the virus in the coming months, as more contagious variants spread.

France and Spain plan to give just one shot of the two-dose vaccines to some people who have recovered from COVID-19, arguing that recent infections act as partial protection against the virus.

Italy, France and the Czech Republic are prioritizing vaccinations in outbreak hotspots. Hungary's leader got a Chinese COVID-19 shot over the weekend and his country and Slovakia are buying Russia's Sputnik V to supplement other vaccines delivered by the EU. Poland's president has suggested that his country may follow Hungary's lead in getting Chinese vaccines.



In this file photo dated Saturday, Oct. 31, 2020, a face mask discarded in front of the Old Opera in Frankfurt, Germany. With accusations of being slow off the blocks in the race to immunise its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject. With its national vaccine campaign lagging far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States, there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch or rewrite the rulebook. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, FILE)

The number of available vaccines across the EU could swell further next week if the European Medicines Agency follows the lead of the U.S. in approving the single-dose vaccine made by Johnson & Johnson. President Joe Biden has indicated the U.S. now expects to take delivery of enough coronavirus vaccine for [all adults by the end of May](#)—two

months earlier than anticipated.

"If we can't vaccinate the little we do have, then we're obviously going to have an even bigger problem when we get a lot of vaccine," said Baerbel Bas, a lawmaker with Germany's center-left Social Democratic Party.

Germany's health minister said more than 5% of the population have now received a first dose.

"But it's clear, we need more tempo," Jens Spahn said, adding that vaccine centers will be given greater flexibility to decide who to give the shots to.



In this Monday, Jan. 25, 2021 file photo, a man wearing a face mask walks past

the Corona Center in Duisburg, Germany. The former Musical theater has been turned into a COVID-19 test and vaccination center. With accusations of being slow off the blocks in the race to immunise its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces the problem of having a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject. With its national vaccine campaign lagging far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States, there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch or rewrite the rulebook. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner, File)

Ursula Nonnemacher, the top health official in Germany's state of Brandenburg, which encircles Berlin, vowed not to leave any precious vaccine doses in storage as she announced the start of vaccinations Wednesday in some doctors' practices.

"Now we're shifting into overdrive," she said.

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