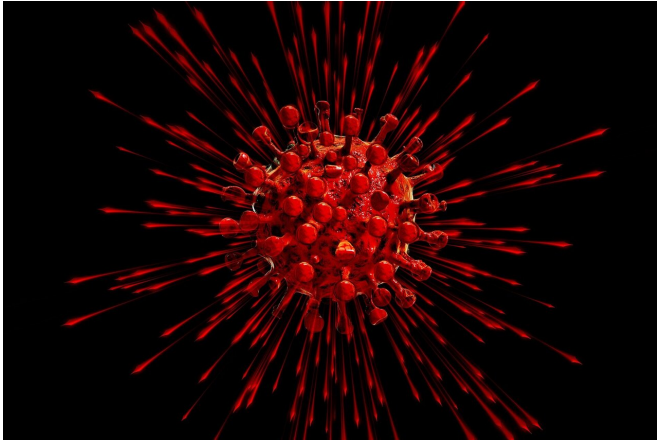


Israel-Pfizer vaccine deal points to 'data for doses' swap

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Israel has secured a significant stock of coronavirus vaccines partly by pledging to quickly share data on its impact with Pfizer, an agreement with the drug company seen by AFP Monday indicates.

The Jewish state has given the first of the two required Pfizer-BioNTech jabs to more than two million people, a pace widely described as the world's fastest, while some wealthy and many poor nations struggle with supply.

Some critics have voiced ethical concerns and raised the danger to medical privacy posed by a "data for doses" arrangement in what one expert termed "one of the most extensive studies of humans" in recent history.

Israel, which experts say has one of the world's most sophisticated medical databases, had not concealed the fact that it agreed to share data with US-German pharma alliance Pfizer-BioNTech during its vaccination campaign.

Israel's health ministry released a partially

redacted copy of the so-called "Real-World Epidemiological Evidence Collaboration Agreement" with Pfizer.

It does not state specific terms of trading the vaccine for medical information, but it does make clear that Pfizer understands Israel must remain well stocked in order to quickly generate quality data about the vaccine.

The deal defines the joint project as an effort to "measure and analyse epidemiological data arising from the product (vaccine) rollout".

It further says Israel's health ministry is relying "on the product delivery rate by Pfizer to allow maintaining (a) vaccination rate sufficient to achieve herd immunity and enough data as soon as possible".

"Both parties acknowledge that the viability and success of the project is dependent on the rate and scope of vaccinations in Israel."

Medical database

Multiple media outlets have also reported that Israel paid Pfizer well above market price to ensure full supply.

The health ministry has declined to comment on those reports.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier this month said that Israel had agreed "to share with Pfizer and with the entire world the statistical data that will help develop strategies for defeating the coronavirus".

Israel's arrangement with Pfizer would help make it "the first country in the world to emerge from the coronavirus," he predicted.

Health data in Israel is collected in part through four

health maintenance organisations (HMOs), non-profit groups that collectively cover the country's nine million people.

They maintain meticulous information about their patients and have been credited with rapidly generating vaccination lists by priority, a factor that experts say has enabled Israel to inoculate so quickly.

But Israel's government also maintains a centralised healthcare database—known as "wagtail," after the migratory bird—which augments HMO data with information from public hospitals and other sources.

Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, a data privacy specialist at the Israel Democracy Institute think-tank who spoke to AFP before the data sharing terms were published, described Israel's digitised medical data as "a very unique asset".

She said regulators had justifiably given emergency approval to Pfizer's vaccine because of the gravity of the pandemic—but that the company was also eagerly seeking more comprehensive data about its product.

"Israel can offer Pfizer, within a month or six weeks, data on a couple of million people," she said.

In a statement issued after the deal was released, she described it as so far "one of the most extensive studies of humans in the 21st century".

"While the agreement might be viewed as an achievement towards expediting Israel's race to be the first country to resume 'normal life' post-COVID, nevertheless it was still necessary to obtain... permission from the residents of Israel to use their health data," she said.

Altshuler has also raised concern about data security and what she terms "sub-group analysis"—meaning information sharing with Pfizer based on categories that are more detailed than simply age and gender.

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