

WHO warns against dismissing AstraZeneca vaccine after setbacks

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The World Health Organization and its Covax partners cautioned Monday against dismissing AstraZeneca's COVID vaccine after several setbacks, insisting it remained an important, life-saving tool.

The AstraZeneca vaccine is currently a vital part of Covax, which was set up to procure COVID-19 vaccines and ensure their equitable distribution around the world.

It accounts for almost all of the 337.2 million vaccine doses Covax is preparing to begin shipping to some 145 countries during the first half of the year, once it receives WHO authorisation, which is expected next week.

But the vaccine has run into several setbacks.

"It is vastly too early to be dismissing this vaccine," said Richard Hatchett, who heads the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), which co-leads the Covax vaccine facility with the WHO and Gavi.

"It is absolutely crucial to use the tools that we have as effectively as we possibly can," he said, speaking at the WHO's regular bi-weekly press briefing on the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

Regulatory authorities in several European nations have refused to authorise the vaccine for use among the over-65s—by far the most vulnerable age group for serious COVID-19 disease—due to a lack of data proving its efficacy among older people.

And South Africa said Sunday it would suspend the start of its COVID-19 vaccinations with the AstraZeneca jab after a study showed the jab failed to prevent mild and moderate cases of the virus variant that has appeared in the country.

'Concerning news'

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters that the study's findings were "clearly concerning news."

But he stressed that there were "some important caveats", pointing in particular to the small size of the study with only 2,000 participants, urging more research.

Other WHO experts also pointed out that the interval used between the two doses of the vaccine in the study was just a month—far shorter than what has been deemed to be optimal to enhance its efficacy.

WHO's vaccines chief Kate O'Brien pointed to other studies showing the vaccine could have a "meaningful impact against severe disease", including with the B.1.351 variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, first detected in South Africa.

She said the organisation's vaccine expert group, which met earlier Monday to discuss its recommendations on the use of the jab, had appeared optimistic about its prospects against the

variant.

The 15-member Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE) is due to render its verdict later this week.

However O'Brien said the experts had expressed "a very positive view on proceeding with the use of the vaccine including in settings where variants are circulating".

Gavi chief Seth Berkley agreed that current evidence indicated the jab "is an efficacious [vaccine](#)."

At the same time, he underscored the need to continue monitoring all the COVID vaccines, and possibly adapting them to better battle new variants "if found to be scientifically necessary."

The WHO's emergencies director Michael Ryan meanwhile said it was vital to use the tools available now to save lives.

"The primary job of vaccines right now is to reduce hospitalisations and deaths, and right now... they are working to do that," he said.

"We may need better vaccines to do more than just stop deaths and hospitalisations."

But "in emergency management you have got to do what you can do now," he added.

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