

AstraZeneca US trials thrown into doubt after promising data

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A US health agency raised concerns Tuesday that AstraZeneca may have included out-of-date information during trials of its COVID-19 vaccine, a day after the company said its drug was highly effective in preventing the disease.

The Anglo-Swedish pharma giant stood by its assessment of the results of its US trials, saying it would publish new data "within 48 hours" in response to concerns raised by the US National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases.

In more bad publicity for AstraZeneca, French authorities said they are investigating the death of a 26-year-old medical student days after he received their COVID-19 vaccine, while stressing that no link had been established yet with the jab.

The fresh problems for the drugmaker, which had on Monday hailed its vaccine as 79 percent effective at preventing COVID-19, come as Europe continues to wrangle over shortages of the jab and after weeks of safety concerns.

With AstraZeneca delivering only 30 percent of the doses it promised the EU for the first quarter, Germany threw its weight behind a ban on European exports of the jab, while also announcing strict virus measures over Easter to contain spiralling infections.

The European Commission will on Wednesday adopt "a revision of the export transparency and authorisation mechanism," a spokesman in Brussels told journalists.

Meanwhile, Britain marked the anniversary of its first [coronavirus](#) lockdown by holding a minute's silence for the more than 126,000 of its citizens who have died from COVID-19, the fifth-highest death toll in the world.

The global death toll now stands at more than 2.7 million.

Putin gets jabbed

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday received his first dose of a coronavirus vaccine, his spokesman said as Russia looks to boost a [vaccination campaign](#) that is faltering despite having produced three home-grown jabs.

Putin thus joined other world leaders who have received jabs including US President Joe Biden, Pope Francis and Britain's Queen Elizabeth.

But unlike many others who were vaccinated in public, Putin's vaccination took place in private and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov did not specify which jab was administered.

AstraZeneca's vaccine had been hailed as a potential game-changer in the fight against the pandemic as it is cheaper and easier to store and transport than many of its rivals, making it more accessible for poorer nations.

But [public confidence](#) in the drug has tumbled after more than a dozen countries temporarily suspended its rollout because of isolated cases of blood clots in people who had received a dose.

The EU's medicines regulator and the World Health Organization insist there is no evidence linking the vaccine to blood clots.

Scant supplies of AstraZeneca doses in Europe have meanwhile hampered the continent's vaccine rollouts, which lag far behind countries like the UK and Israel.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Tuesday that his country should be giving vaccines "morning, noon and evening", as his government announced that 35 new mass inoculation centres would open soon.

"We're going to change pace from April," he said, adding that there should be "no weekend and days off when it comes to vaccinations".

'Much deadlier'

In Germany, Merkel ordered a nationwide shutdown for five days between April 1 and April 5 as Christians celebrate Easter, with almost all shops closed and [religious services](#) moved online.

A variant first identified in Britain has become the dominant strain circulating in Germany, she said, adding: "We are in a new pandemic."

"Essentially, we have a new virus... it is much deadlier, much more infectious and infectious for much longer."

The Netherlands announced it is extending its coronavirus restrictions until April 20 as cases are rising.

Ukraine said it too was battling a new wave of infections as it reported the highest death toll since the beginning of the crisis, with 300 fatalities in the past 24 hours.

And in Slovakia, liberal President Zuzana Caputova demanded the resignation of centrist Premier Igor

Matovic as the country struggles with one of the world's highest COVID-19 death rates.

Banksy fundraiser

In tribute to its COVID dead, Britain held a "National Day of Reflection" on Tuesday, with parliament holding a minute's silence and bells ringing out across the country.

The country's state-run National Health Service (NHS) has been under huge strain, and on Tuesday a painting by UK street artist Banksy sold for a record £16.75 million (\$23.1 million, 19.4 million euros) in an auction by Christie's to raise money for health workers.

The artist left a note with the piece thanking hospital staff for their work battling the pandemic.

"Thanks for all you're doing. I hope this brightens up the place a bit, even if it's only in black and white," he wrote.

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