

Vaccine distribution mired in delays across Europe

Will Morrow
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As the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread out of control throughout the European continent, the program of vaccination organized by the European Union is already widely recognized to be a debacle. With governments lacking any plan for the international distribution of a vaccine, key infrastructure and services undermined by years of funding cuts to the health care system, and decision-making subordinated to the profit interests of giant pharmaceutical corporations, Europe's vaccination rollout has been among the slowest in the world.

The situation is particularly stark in France, where the slow pace of the vaccine rollout has created a political scandal for the Macron government. The first vaccination at an aged-care facility took place with great fanfare and media blitz on December 27, the same weekend that the EU approved the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Since then, approximately 5,000 people have been vaccinated in France, according to the latest data published January 5 by the health ministry. This amounts to an average of 500 people per day. Continuing at this pace, it would take more than three centuries to vaccinate 90 percent of the French population.

The rollout is not significantly more advanced elsewhere. In Germany, just over 367,000 people had received a vaccination by January 5. It would take until 2027 to vaccinate the German population at this rate. Italy has vaccinated only 260,000; Spain, 139,000; and Denmark, 63,000; all as of January 5. The Netherlands is yet to vaccinate anyone, with the government announcing that it will not commence vaccinations until January 18.

Britain, which approved the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine at the beginning of December and administered the first vaccine on December 8, only

1.3 million people had received a vaccination by Thursday. At this rate it would take more than four years to vaccinate the population.

As of Monday, Israel, population 8.84 million, had vaccinated more people than the entire EU, population 447 million.

Popular anger has prompted mutual recriminations by governments attempting to shift blame for the incompetent and chaotic rollout. Last weekend, the head of the German Christian Social Union Markus Söder criticized the European Commission for not purchasing enough of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine early enough. This was followed by BioNTech CEO and newly minted billionaire U?ur ?ahin stating in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that he had been surprised by the low number of vaccines purchased by the EU.

Beginning in June, the European Commission purchased more than 2 billion vaccines, enough to vaccinate the entire population more than twice over. However, given the uncertainty over which vaccine would prove to be effective, it spread the purchases across six different vaccines, including Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, Oxford/AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson.

Until Wednesday this week, when the EU authorized the use of the Moderna vaccine that has already been approved in the US and UK, the Pfizer/BioNTech remained the sole vaccine authorized for use on the continent.

Pfizer was forced to announce that it would be unable to meet its promised outlay of 12.5 million vaccines by the end of December. It has pledged to increase production in Europe, but announced that it remained in private negotiations with five to six private manufacturers over the terms of a contract for the manufacture of the drug. With billions of people

internationally depending upon the rapid distribution of a vaccine and the eradication of the virus, the urgent needs of humanity are subordinate to the profit interests of pharmaceutical giants and a relative handful of their large shareholders that have already reaped billions from the crisis. (See “ COVID-19: Global vaccination stymied by nationalism and profit gouging ”)

Commentators note that a major bottleneck has been in the use of the vaccines that have already been distributed to countries. None of the countries in Europe have distributed a large portion of the doses they have already received. Germany, which has proceeded the furthest, has distributed less than one half the doses that it has available.

In France, the Macron government has faced a scandal over the slow pace of its vaccine delivery. It had initially focused exclusively on vaccinations in aged care facilities. Besides this, no decisions were taken for the creation of vaccination centers across the country. In the face of the escalating political scandal, Macron leaked statements to the press criticizing the slow pace of the rollout from his government. Health minister Olivier Véran tweeted on January 2 pledging that there would be 100 vaccination centers created across the country over the course of the next week.

The Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccines all require two doses to be administered separated by several weeks to the same patient to obtain the effectiveness recorded in clinical trials. Governments are increasingly moving toward expanding the time interval between successive doses to simplify the process of the distribution of the vaccine and shortcut their own logistical failures. They are doing so without scientific evidence as to the impact that such a lengthening will have on the efficacy of the vaccine.

The UK has already announced that it will extend to 12 weeks the time interval between the two doses of both the Oxford/AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines—double the time length recommended by the European Medicines Agency. There are also discussions of similar moves in Germany and the Netherlands.

Pfizer released a statement explaining that “there are no data to demonstrate that protection after the first dose is sustained after 21 days.” The World Health Organization’s representative Dr. Joachim Hombach

noted that “there is very little empirical data from the trials that underpin this type of recommendation” to extend the separation between doses. (See “ The COVID-19 vaccination efforts in the US are proving to be a massive debacle ”)

The chaotic and incompetent rollout of the vaccine is driven by the same interests that have motivated the response to the pandemic by capitalist governments internationally from the outset. They have rejected the closure of schools and nonessential production, with full wages paid to quarantined workers, to prevent the transmission of the virus, because such policies would impact on the profits of major corporations. Their priority is the protection of corporate profits, not lives.

Yet such measures are essential to any serious policy of vaccination. The spread of the virus must be halted to provide time for the vaccine to be distributed throughout the population in a safe manner in line with the most accurate scientific estimates.



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