

# Canada signs deal to secure 'millions of doses' of promising COVID-19 vaccines

*Tonda MacCharles*

OTTAWA —The Canadian government says it has signed two deals to purchase “millions of doses” of promising vaccine candidates against COVID-19 but won't say how much it will cost or how many doses it will buy, citing ongoing negotiations with multiple international suppliers.

With the global drive to develop a vaccine in full gear, a senior cabinet minister suggested Wednesday Ottawa would likely not make a COVID-19 vaccine mandatory — the first indication of how a national vaccine rollout might be conducted if and when an effective immunization becomes available.

Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said Ottawa has signed procurement agreements with Pfizer Canada working with BioNTech in Germany, and separately with U.S.-based Moderna, each of which have advanced to stage three of clinical trials of their vaccine candidates.

Anand said the agreements demonstrate “our aggressive approach to secure vaccine candidates now so that Canadians are at the front of the line when a vaccine becomes available.”

Any potential vaccine will have to pass Health Canada regulatory approval before distribution to Canadians, she said.

Anand suggested vaccination against COVID-19 would not be mandatory, but said it's likely that vulnerable populations would be at “the top of the list” for immunization.

But her cabinet colleague, Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry Navdeep Bains, said it is too early to say whether a vaccine would be mandatory.

Both said the government would be guided by public health authorities and the advice of an independent vaccine task force.

Anand, citing remarks a day earlier by Canada's chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam, characterized a vaccine as just one layer of additional protection.

The minister leading Canada's international procurement efforts told reporters that Tam's remarks show “there is not one solution to carry Canadians and the Canadian economy out of the pandemic. Multiple efforts on multiple fronts must be made and followed, and so in terms of the vaccination, that would likely not be mandatory, as Dr. Tam has mentioned.”

“It is an added protection that would hopefully be available to Canadians who are taking monumental efforts now to wear PPE (personal protective equipment), to stay at home, to social distance even as we enter additional phases of the pandemic,” said Anand. “We all want a silver bullet. But unfortunately, that's not the case.”

Contrary to Anand's assertion, however, Tam did not state that a vaccine would not become mandatory.

Nor has Prime Minister Justin Trudeau indicated what approach his government would take.

"We still have a fair bit of time to reflect on that in order to get it right," Trudeau said on April 28, saying there are "important decisions" to take "around the COVID-19 vaccine when it comes."

On Tuesday, Tam did caution Canadians against putting all their hopes in a vaccine, pointing out that many questions remain. Tam repeated warnings issued last week by the WHO that there is "no silver bullet" on the horizon against the coronavirus — warnings Anand and Bains echoed.

The ministers on Wednesday said Ottawa is also spending millions to boost domestic vaccine production capacity — and to ensure an adequate supply of syringes, alcohol swabs and needles — in order to be able to manufacture and distribute a vaccine here.

A vaccine tracker published by the Vaccine Centre at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, identified 226 potential vaccine candidates in the development pipeline around the world.

So far, Health Canada has approved clinical trials in Canada to test the safety and effectiveness of just four possible vaccines here.

As of Wednesday, the federal Public Health Agency was reporting the disease has killed nearly 9,000 Canadians and infected at least nearly 118,000.

Tam said Tuesday questions need to be answered through clinical trials of vaccine candidates including "the degree and the duration of the immunity. How many doses of vaccine do we need? Do we need a booster later on?"

Tam said even when a successful vaccine is identified, there will be ongoing challenges to develop, manufacture and distribute enough of it, and the success of any vaccination program "will also depend on how the virus is undergoing evolution. Will it change? Will the current vaccine need to be adapted if the virus should change?"

With those questions in play, Tam said, public health authorities foresee having to manage the pandemic "certainly over the next year but maybe planning for the longer term, the next two to three years during which the vaccine may play a role but we don't know yet"

On Wednesday, the ministers faced questions raised by at least one Canadian company that says it has heard nothing back from Ottawa on its request to begin human clinical trials despite early promising results from animal tests of its vaccine candidate.

Providence Therapeutics said in a news release that after two blinded preclinical studies at the University of Toronto and Mount Sinai Hospital, it was able to stimulate the production of antibodies in mice that were injected with the coronavirus, suggesting their vaccine candidate could produce "possible long-lasting immunity."

Its study had not yet been peer-reviewed, but the company is eager to move to the

stage of conducting human clinical trials.

Bains said while he applauds the “passion” of many Canadian scientists, the government will take its guidance from the two task forces it has appointed to review and recommend most promising vaccine and therapeutic treatment candidates.

He said more announcements would follow as the task forces do their work.

In a statement, Pfizer and BioNTech said the terms of the deal with Canada are “based on the timing of delivery and the volume of doses. As requested by the Government of Canada, deliveries of the vaccine candidate are planned for over the course of 2021.”

BioNTech executive Sean Marett said the company is working to advance its lead vaccine candidate through clinical development “in order to seek regulatory review as early as October. At the same time, Pfizer and BioNTech continue to scale up manufacturing capacities to be able to produce up to 100 million doses in 2020 and more than 1 billion doses in 2021.”

The U.K. and the U.S. have similarly struck deals with Pfizer to purchase doses of a successful vaccine. Anand said on Wednesday Pfizer has at least four vaccine candidates in trials now. The U.S. inked a deal with Pfizer and BioNTech to purchase 100 million doses with an option of buying another 500 million of a vaccine, subject to regulatory approval.

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