

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

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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.”