



NEWS

Why did Justin Trudeau preorder so much COVID-19 vaccine? He says he learned from his earlier mistake

By [Tonda MacCharles](#) Ottawa Bureau

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OTTAWA –Canada’s global scramble in the spring to buy personal protective equipment for front-line health workers taught the federal Liberal government a painful lesson – that it had to get a jump on buying [vaccines](#), says Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#).

In his first specific admission of where his government made mistakes during the pandemic, Trudeau told an interviewer that he wished his government had acted sooner to procure PPE – masks, face shields, gowns and gloves – in January.

Looking back, he wished that when Dr. Theresa Tam “started telling us about the potential of the concerning news coming out in January, coming out of China, we would have immediately turned around and started to procure lots of PPE,” Trudeau told CITY-TV.

“At the beginning of the pandemic in March and April, where they were real concerns about front-line health workers who were reusing masks and having to bring them home and wash them, that was something that I would have loved to have been able to avoid.”

Canada has since acquired more than 2 billion pieces of PPE “so we’re fine now, but in those first months, I think we needed to be readier and we’re going to make sure that going forward, Canada is never caught without equipment to protect our front-line workers again,” he said.

“There’s lots of things we’ve learned, but one of the things we learned through the scramble on PPE was to be early on vaccines.”

Vaccination in many provinces is underway already after Health Canada gave its first approval to a COVID-19 vaccine made by Pfizer/BioNTech.

On Wednesday, deputy chief public health officer Dr. Howard Njoo said regulators are expected to make a decision on a second vaccine, produced by Massachusetts-based Moderna, “in the near future.”

The Moderna vaccine is highly anticipated because it does not have the same ultracold storage requirements as Pfizer’s, which must be used within six hours once it is thawed and mixed. Moderna’s vaccine can be stored at -20C and is stable once thawed for about 30 days at regular refrigerator temperatures.

Canada has purchased 40 million doses from Moderna, and expects delivery of up to 168,000 doses before the end of December, conditional on Health Canada approval. Deliveries could begin within 48 hours of regulatory authorization.

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That vaccine is being eyed by provinces and territories for many hard-to-reach communities.

Most provinces have begun to administer the two-step Pfizer vaccine, mainly to long-term-care residents, staff and other front-line health workers.

Yet even as vaccinations begin in many urban areas, a massive scramble is on to prepare northern and remote Indigenous communities to be ready to receive vaccines which have been allotted to provincial and territorial governments on a per-capita basis.

There is no special allotment, top-up or designated shipment for Indigenous communities, and it is up to provinces to distribute to them.

Ontario Solicitor General Sylvia Jones said the province's Ornge air ambulance service will help "ensure remote and northern communities get the vaccine as quickly as possible" once transportable supplies arrive.

Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, the military commander overseeing the Public Health Agency of Canada's vaccine rollout, said

"dry runs" to test the capacity of provinces and territories to deliver the Moderna vaccine to remote, rural and northern communities are underway.

The territories opted not to receive any Pfizer vaccines because of the lack of ultracold storage capacity and the difficulties in handling the product, and have requested their per-capita share in Moderna vaccines.

Dr. Evan Adams, deputy chief medical officer at Indigenous Services Canada, said there have been nearly 6,400 COVID-19 cases in First Nations communities, with the disease reaching into 50 per cent of reserves, and 55 on-reserve deaths.

Adams said there are "alarmingly high" numbers of cases among Indigenous people in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

He urged all governments to "hear out" the concerns of Indigenous leaders about the best way to carry out a vaccine program in their communities.

Adams and Dr. Tom Wong, the federal chief medical officer responsible, said Indigenous leaders want to ensure their health workers and elders are protected, as

federal guidelines recommend.

But there are other complicating factors. Life expectancy is about 15 years shorter for Indigenous people than in the general Canadian population. There are also greater disparities that affect health – things like unemployment, access to clean drinking water, food insecurity – and a higher incidence of underlying conditions like diabetes than in non-Indigenous communities.

“Indigenous partners are advocating for starting at a younger age compared to the general Canadian population,” Wong said. “And if you actually look at the First Nations data that’s being released by First Nations in Manitoba, you can actually see that the median age of the fatal (COVID-19) cases, they are 15-20 years younger than the general Manitoban population.”

With files from Rob Ferguson

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