

Healthcare workers to receive J&J jab

Phase one of vaccine rollout could commence as soon as next week with healthcare workers receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine instead of an AstraZeneca jab.



Image source: [123rf.com](https://www.123rf.com)

Updating the country on the latest developments, health minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize, said the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been proven effective against 501Y.V2, while necessary approval processes for use locally are underway.

South Africa paused its rollout plan following the results that showed that the University of Oxford's AstraZeneca vaccine was less effective against the Covid-19 infection from the 501Y.V2 Coronavirus variant, first identified in South Africa in November 2020.

Meanwhile, the minister announced that the country has secured shots from Pfizer for phase one rollout, which will land on home soil earlier than was expected. Mkhize said government is awaiting for the complete schedule of the distribution of the vaccines and hopes the negotiations will be wrapped up next week. Also local scientists are working around the clock to engage with other vaccines manufacturers.

“Engagements with Sinopharm are continuing with already an offer made by China of some vaccines which have been considered and a non-disclosure agreement has been signed and ratification processes in Sahpra (South African Health Products Regulatory Authority) is in progress.”

Likewise, engagements with the United States' drugmaker Moderna, which has entered a supply agreement for Covid-19 vaccine with Taiwan and Colombia, are ongoing.

On the other hand, scientists are continuing with deliberations on the AstraZeneca use in the country.

“ Depending on the advice, the vaccine will be swapped before the expiry date to ensure they don't become wasteful and fruitless expenditure. Mkhize said government does not intend to claim back the money, but was planning to utilise the AstraZeneca vaccine based on expert advice, including from the World Health Organisation Covax and United Kingdom's Health Secretary.

“ This is because in the rest of the world, this is a highly used vaccine, so there are already countries who are asking to sell it to them. ”

He said other countries are lining up as they want to get hold of the AstraZeneca that is already in the country and government is considering selling it to them. In addition, he urged citizens to prevent the spread of COVID-19 until the country reaches herd immunity by washing hands with soap or sanitising, wearing masks and social distancing.

Expiry date

Mkhize also addressed the issue of the expiry date of the vaccine batches, which is April 2021. “The vaccines have not expired,” he stressed. However, in keeping with the original vaccination plan, Mkhize said the department would have proceeded with the AstraZeneca rollout plan and the doses would have been used by the expiry date. “The expiry date would have not been a factor at all because we would have started the vaccinations and we were targeting to have finished them long before that date.” He also said the expiry date was not discovered by accident but through their quality assurance and control protocols. “Sometimes when a matter is raised in the media and comes out as a leak, people don’t say it’s our information that they used which we already knew about. It’s not so much they discovered something they didn’t know about. Checking the expiring date is one of the basic things you do when you manage a medical product.”

Developing a local vaccine

Mkhize believes that South Africa has the capacity to create its own in-demand vaccines. According to Mkhize, President Cyril Ramaphosa has since directed a team to start looking into this matter. ”

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