



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
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Media Statement on expiry and disposal of COVID-19 Pfizer vaccines

Pretoria: The Department of Health has been inundated with media and public enquiries since the announcement about more than 80 000 COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine doses facing disposal by the end of this month as a result of expiry.

The department has an obligation to ensure that all medical products including vaccines which have reached shelf life are quarantined and disposed accordingly.

Since last year, the South African government has managed to secure sufficient COVID-19 vaccines doses to immunise all eligible citizens in the country as part of the country's response to COVID-19 pandemic to save lives.

The government has been administering two vaccines, Janssen® vaccine and Pfizer Cominarty® vaccine as part of the vaccination rollout programme. Since February 2021, we have received 39 272 220 doses of Pfizer vaccine and 20,076,800 doses of J&J vaccine, which include donations from COVAX facility and other foreign governments.

The current stock on hand of the Pfizer Cominarty® vaccine and Janssen® vaccine at our central warehouses is 11 558 190 Pfizer doses and 11 162 700 J&J doses, respectively.

Vaccine deliveries were staggered based on availability of doses and storage capacity in the country. Due to the short shelf life of the Pfizer vaccine, all countries are challenged to utilise vaccines before expiry. Every effort is being made to ensure that vaccines are utilised efficiently/optimally, and that wastage is minimised.

To date 33,405,701 doses of COVID-19 vaccine has been administered and no unused vaccines have been discarded at the central warehouses due to expiry. However, at the end of this month of March, about 92 370 doses of Pfizer vaccine are due to expire and will be disposed according to minimum standard for the disposal and destruction of medicines and scheduled substances.

The volume due to expire is equivalent to 0.24% of all Pfizer doses received, which is under the World Health Organization (WHO) 10% acceptable ratio of vaccine waste. All expiring stock is held in quarantine until the last day of expiry after which the existing protocol for the destruction of medical waste will be activated to ensure safe and environmentally responsible disposal.

The current stock of Pfizer vaccine have the following expiry dates: 897 270 doses to expire in May, 5 845 800 to expire in June, while 4 831 560 are facing expiry by the end of July.

The manufacturers' shelf life from the date of manufacture of the Comirnaty® (Pfizer) vaccine is nine months when stored at minus 70°C and 24 months for the COVID-19 vaccine Janssen® when stored at minus 20°C. However, by the time the vaccine is received in-country, this already shelf life is reduced.

In contrast to the demand at the start of the vaccination programme, the current demand for vaccine has waned. The Department continues to explore various options to mitigate the wastage of vaccines as a result of expiry, including exchange and donation through COVAX Facility.

However, not all countries use the same vaccines as those administered in South Africa, while other countries are also facing low vaccine uptake. The challenge of vaccine hesitancy is not only experienced in South Africa, but globally, hence several countries had to dispose of expired vaccines as well.

Additionally, some countries that could potentially accept the vaccines do not have the necessary infrastructure to safely store these vaccines at the required ultra-cold chain temperature to prevent avoidable wastage.

Although this is the first disposal of COVID-19 related medical products, but the fact of the matter is, the government is disposing medical products on a regular basis, and this is handled carefully according to the relevant health, safety and environmental legislation.

The government will remain transparent in this regard and update the South Africans on the management of COVID-19, including the vaccine doses administered and disposed as measure of accountability. This forms the bedrock of our strategic management of the pandemic and its related issues.

While the experts anticipate the next wave around winter period, the government working with together with various stakeholders continuously explore various vaccine demand creation strategies to increase vaccine uptake. We are not out of the woods yet, and all unvaccinated and partly vaccinated people are urged to fully vaccinate and get booster shots to enhance their protection from severe illness and death.

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