

COVID-19

EU considering Oxford job

US won't hold back 2nd vaccine doses

WASHINGTON, Jan 13, (AP) — Barely a month into a mass vaccination campaign to stop the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration unexpectedly shifted gears Tuesday to speed the delivery of shots. A slow start had triggered widespread concern from states and public health officials.

Now, Health and Human Services Alex Azar has announced two major changes. First, the government will no longer hold back required second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, practically doubling supply. Second, states should immediately start vaccinating other groups lower down the priority scale, including people age 65 and older, and younger people with certain health problems.

The move better aligns the outgoing administration with the new Biden-Harris team. On Friday, President-elect Joe Biden said he will rapidly release most available vaccine doses to protect more people. He said he supported immediately releasing vaccines that health authorities were holding back out of caution, to guarantee they would be available for people needing their second dose.



Biden

"We had been holding back second doses as a safety stock," Azar said on ABC. "We now believe that our manufacturing is predictable enough that we can ensure second doses are available for people from ongoing production. So everything is now available to our states and our health care providers."

Simultaneously, he gave states the green light to dramatically expand the pool of people eligible to receive vaccines.

"We are calling on our governors to now vaccinate people aged 65 and over, and under age 65 with a (health condition) because we have got to expand the group," he said.

As of Monday morning, the government had distributed about 25.5 million doses to states, US territories and major cities. But only about 9 million people had received their first shot. That means only about 35% of the available vaccines had been administered.

Initially, the shots were going to health care workers and nursing home residents. Those 75 and older were next in line. But problems arose even in vaccinating that limited pool of people. Some hospital and nursing home workers have been hesitant to get the vaccine. Scheduling issues created delays in getting shots to nursing homes.

Vaccinations

Some states, including Arizona, have or are planning to open up mass vaccination centers, aiming to inoculate thousands of people a day in a single location. In Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis opened up vaccinations to people 65 and older. In other states, local health authorities have started asking residents 65 and older to register, in anticipation the vaccination campaign would be expanded.

"We've got to get to more channels of administration," said Azar. "We've got to get it to pharmacies, get it to community health centers."

"We will deploy teams to support states doing mass vaccination efforts if they wish to do so," he added.

Although Azar said the shift was a natural evolution of the Trump administration's efforts, as recently as Friday he had raised questions about whether Biden's call to accelerate supplies was prudent. The Trump administration, which directed a crash effort to develop and manufacture vaccines, is hoping to avoid a repeat of earlier debacles with coronavirus testing. Dubbed "Operation Warp Speed," the effort has produced two highly effective vaccines, with more on the way.

Each state has its own plan for who should be vaccinated, based on recommendations from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC recommendations give first priority to health care workers and nursing home residents.

But the slow pace of the vaccine rollout has frustrated many Americans at a time when the coronavirus death toll has continued to rise. More than 376,000 people have died, according to the Johns Hopkins database.

US Surgeon General Jerome Adams said hundreds of thousands of people are getting vaccinated every day across the nation, but the pace of inoculations needs to improve.

"We're in a race against this virus and quite frankly, we're behind," Adams told "Fox & Friends." "The good news is that 700,000 people are getting vaccinated every single day. We're going to hit 1 million people and we need to continue to pick up that pace."

In Philadelphia, health department spokesman James Garrow, said the new direction from Washington will take time to figure out before it impacts vaccine distribution in the city. "This is a wholesale change out of the blue after months of planning," Garrow said.

Washington, D.C. on Monday opened up vaccines to residents 65 years and older and the system was quickly overwhelmed. People reported problems with the website for registration and hours-long waits to register by phone. A message on the city's website Tuesday morning read, "All 6,700 of the available vaccination appointments for the week of 1/11/21 were filled."

Biden is expected to give a speech Thursday outlining his plan to speed vaccines to more people in the first part of his administration. His transition team has vowed to release as many vaccine doses as possible, rather than continuing the Trump administration policy of holding back millions of doses to ensure there would be enough supply to allow those getting the first shot to get a second one.

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine requires a second shot about three weeks after the first vaccination. Another vaccine, this one produced by Moderna, requires a second shot about four weeks afterward. One-shot vaccines are still undergoing testing.

Also:

LONDON: The European Medicines Agency said Tuesday that AstraZeneca and Oxford University have submitted an application for their COVID-19 vaccine to be licensed across the European Union.

The EU regulator said it received a request for the vaccine to be greenlighted under an expedited process and that it could be approved by Jan 29 "provided that the data submitted on the quality, safety and efficacy of the vaccine are sufficiently robust and complete." The EMA, the drugs agency for the 27-nation EU, has already approved two other coronavirus vaccines, one made by American drugmaker Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech and another made by US biotechnology company Moderna. Switzerland approved the Moderna vaccine on Tuesday and plans to immunize about 4% of its population using that and the Pfizer-BioNTech shot.

Britain gave its approval to the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine last month and has been using it. India approved it this month.

As part of its strategy to obtain as many different COVID-19 vaccines as possible for Europeans, the EU said it had concluded early talks with French biotech company Valneva to secure up to 60 million doses of vaccine.

Valneva previously signed a deal with Britain to provide tens of millions of doses of its shot, which is developed using similar technology to that used to make flu vaccines. The EU has sealed six vaccine contracts for up to 2 billion doses, many more than are necessary to cover its population of approximately 450 million.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is expected to be a key vaccine for many countries because of its low cost, availability and ease of use. It can be kept in refrigerators rather than the ultra-cold storage that the Pfizer vaccine requires. The company has said it will sell it for \$2.50 a dose and plans to make up to 3 billion doses by the end of 2021.

Researchers claim the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine protected against disease in 62% of those given two full doses and in 90% of those initially given a half dose because of a manufacturing error. However, the second group included only 2,741 people - too few to be conclusive.



Jim Clark, 86, receives a first dose of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine from UC Davis Health on Jan 12, in Sacramento, Calif. (AP)



Dr. Matthew Kroh, the Chief of the Digestive Disease Institute at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, says 28-year-old was transferred to Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi with severe complications that affect less than 1 percent of patients.



Winmill



Akland

Ecology

Bid to cut beetle protections: An environmental group said Tuesday that it plans to sue the US government over a decision to reclassify a large scavenging beetle as threatened instead of endangered. The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity said it will sue the US Fish and Wildlife Services over its move last fall to list the American burying beetle as threatened. It had been considered an endangered species since 1989, and the location of its habitat in Plains states created issues for the Keystone XL oil pipeline and other oil and gas projects.

"Far from having recovered, this striking orange-and-black beetle is facing dire threats from climate change and habitat destruction," said attorney Kristine Akland with the center. Akland said the rule change was a result of pressure from the oil and gas industry.

Federal officials have said that conservation efforts over the past three decades have helped the beetle's population recover, and it can now be found in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota and on Nantucket Island off the coast of Massachusetts. At the time the beetle was termed endangered, it was found only in small populations in eastern Oklahoma and Block Island off the coast of Rhode Island.

Fish and Wildlife Services spokeswoman Lesli Gray said the agency "used the best available science in its decision to downlist the American burying beetle." She declined to comment about the threatened lawsuit because officials haven't had a chance to review it.

The agency has acknowledged that the beetle continues to face threats from climate change and land use changes, but officials have said the beetle no longer meets the definition of endangered.

Over the years, the oil and gas industry has borne significant costs to protect the beetle and other endangered species. The large, black, nocturnal beetle has hardened protective wing covers marked by two scalloped shaped orange patterns. The beetles are scavengers that eat decaying animals. They lay their eggs beside a small carcass that they bury, then feed their larvae from that carcass. Mallori Miller with the Independent Petroleum Association of America trade group said she is confident the new threatened listing for the beetle will be upheld. (AP)

Sage grouse review done: The Trump

Health

Cleveland Clinic treats rare surgery complications

Young Emirati pulled from brink of death

ABU DHABI, UAE, Jan 13: When Abdulla decided to undergo bariatric surgery at a facility in the UAE to help improve his quality of life, he was assured of the safety and effectiveness of the procedure. But what was meant to be a few hours in the operation room followed by a swift recovery turned into several weeks of ordeal and a month in a coma for the 28-year-old patient because of rare, unexpected complications.

His life was saved when he was transferred to Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, an integral part of Mubadala Health, which has specialists who can help in extreme cases such as his.

"You don't go into a routine surgery like this expecting it to turn into a stroke, especially at my age," says Abdulla.

"I remember the pain that I felt right after the surgery, which wasn't normal at all. I could feel it course through my body. It kept on increasing to a point that I could not handle it anymore. That is when I realized that something was wrong," he says.

Dr. Matthew Kroh, the Chief of the Digestive Disease Institute at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, says Abdulla was transferred to the hospital needing an immediate reoperation.

"I received a call from surgeons at the hospital where Abdulla had the surgery explaining that he had entered a life-threatening situation and that it would require the multidisciplinary expertise of our hospital to save him," says Dr. Kroh.

Abdulla's operation was complicated by an injury to the diaphragm and required an urgent reoperation, which included the resection of 150 centimeters of his small intestine and part of his colon, as well.

"This was a life threatening event and a very unusual complication which led to a severe outcome for such a young patient," he says.

"He recovered from that but had a major pulmonary aspiration event where his stomach contents went into

his lungs and hardened them. This resulted in a severe lung infection and eventually a drop in his blood pressure and hypoxemia. He was immediately transferred to Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi's intensive care unit where our team determined that his condition had deteriorated to such an extent that he would have to be placed on an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machine, which is only available at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi."

His oxygenation got better with the quick intervention and the infection in his lungs began to clear up, but the connection of his intestines fell apart.

"He then had a severe infection in his abdominal cavity that required several operations as an additional section of the colon needed to be resected. We had to wash his insides out and put his bowel back together. All this while he was still on the ECMO machine."

Recovered

During the staged operation, which took place over six weeks, he was supported by parenteral nutrition. As Abdulla slowly recovered and regained strength, he was removed from breathing support, extubated and began eating on his own.

Abdulla has dropped from 150kgs to 102kgs since the surgery but says that it has been an arduous journey with still a long way to go.

"The stroke affected my hands and legs and the doctors at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi conducted physical therapy while I was still in intensive care. I have regained a lot of my mobility but will require more therapy. I am in constant touch with Dr. Kroh to ensure that my nutrition is on track. There are no words to describe my gratitude for him and his team, and even thanking them a million times is not enough," he said.

Dr. Kroh adds: "Abdulla has done exceedingly well through these surgeries. It underscores his will and our commitment to provide integrated

care to treat the sickest of the sick. Abdulla has a lot of life ahead of him and we will make sure he is back to doing all his daily tasks and activities that he enjoys with minimum discomfort soon."

For more information or to book an appointment at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, call 800 222 33, visit www.clevelandclinicabudhabi.ac or download the Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi app

Source: Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi (bold)

Also:

NEW YORK: Researchers on Tuesday reported another record one-year decline in the US cancer death rate, a drop they attribute to success against lung cancer.

The overall cancer death rate has been falling since 1991. From 2017 to 2018, it fell 2.4%, according to an American Cancer Society report, topping the record 2.2% drop reported the year before.

Lung cancer accounted for almost half of the overall decline in cancer deaths in the past five years, the society reported.

Most lung cancer cases are tied to smoking, and decades of declining smoking rates have led to falling rates of lung cancer illnesses and deaths. But experts say the drop in deaths has been accelerated by refinements in surgery, better diagnostic scanning, more precise use of radiation and the impact of newer drugs.

"Both men and women who are diagnosed with lung cancer are surviving longer and that's really fantastic news," said Dr. Deborah Schrag, chief of population sciences at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, in a statement.

Cancer remains the country's second leading cause of death, after heart disease. An estimated 1.9 million new US cancer cases will be diagnosed this year. Nearly 609,000 Americans will die from cancer, the society estimates.

administration has completed a review of plans to ease protections for a struggling bird species in seven states in the US West, but there's little time to put the relaxed rules for industry into action before President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

The ground-dwelling, chicken-sized greater sage grouse has been at the center of a long-running dispute over how much of the American West's expansive public

lands should be developed.

A federal judge blocked the Trump administration in 2019 from its plans to relax rules on mining, drilling and grazing across millions of acres of land because of potential harm to the sage grouse.

After releasing an environmental study in November aimed at justifying the changes, Bureau of Land Management officials said in a notice Monday that they

stand behind their plans.

But the ruling that blocked the changes is still in place. And with just eight days left before Biden's inauguration, environmentalists said the Trump administration's latest move won't change anything, barring a last-minute reversal by the court. "It's a nothing burger. It's a parting shot on the way out the door," said Greta Anderson with Western Watershed Project, one of the group's involved in the legal case. "We don't expect the Biden administration to defend these terrible plans."

Sage grouse once numbered in the millions but have seen their range that stretches across portions of 11 states diminished by oil and gas drilling, wildfires, grazing and other pressures.

The Obama administration, with Biden as vice president, adopted restrictions in 2015 meant to protect the best grouse habitat and keep the bird off the threatened and endangered species list.

Trump moved to change those plans in 2017, but the Obama rules were reinstated under a 2019 injunction from US District Judge B. Lynn Winmill in Boise, Idaho.

Bureau of Land Management officials did not reply to emailed questions about whether they will ask Winmill to lift the injunction.

The Trump administration changes would have affected public land in Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, California and Oregon. Sage grouse territory in Montana, Washington and the Dakotas would not have affected. (AP)



Hospital staff sit in the rest area for fifteen minutes after receiving the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine against Covid-19 disease, during the employee vaccination program at the Bethel Hospital in Berlin, Germany, on Jan 13. A total of 66 employees will be vaccinated at the hospital with the first BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine. (AP)