

Billionsaire Soon-Shiong opens new vaccine plant in South Africa

South African-American businessman Patrick Soon-Shiong opened a new vaccine plant in Cape Town on Wednesday.



Source: REUTERS/Shelley Christians. Cyril Ramaphosa and Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong cut a ribbon, while Premier of the Western Cape Alan Winde looks on.

He intends to help his local NantSA company make Covid-19 shots in future and address the continent's deadly dearth of manufacturing capacity.

The pandemic has exposed a global lack of access to life-saving vaccines, particularly in Africa, where just about 10% of the population has been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 compared to over half the world's population.

"Africa should no longer be last in line to access vaccines against pandemics. Africa should no longer go cap in hand to the Western world, begging and begging for vaccines," said South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who attended the opening.

Soon-Shiong, who is also a medical doctor, will transfer technology and materials from his California-based NantWorks to scientists in South Africa, where they will also work on vaccines targeting cancer, TB and HIV.

Scholarship offering

"Greater self-sufficiency is essential," Matshidiso Moeti, World Health Organization (WHO) regional director for Africa, said in a message of support for the plant, which aims to produce 1 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses a year by 2025.

Soon-Shiong said he would transfer bioreactors stockpiled at his US factories, with first production of vaccines to be seen later this year. To ensure a pipeline of skilled workers, he has pledged R100m (\$6.5 million) for scholarships.

"We now have the capability to use the human capital of South Africans to build 21st-century medicine," Soon-Shiong told Ramaphosa, as he entered one of two warehouses, currently empty, in the semi-industrial area of Brackenfell near Cape Town.

Scientists in South Africa have been at the forefront of combating the pandemic, alerting the world to both the Beta and Omicron variants of concern after detecting them quickly.

A move away from vaccine imports

But health experts have warned obstacles, including electricity and water shortages that hamper manufacturing processes, must be tackled before Africa can wean itself off imported vaccines.

Pharmaceutical firms, like Pfizer, as well as the WHO, have sought to bridge the gap in poorer countries' access to vaccines by upgrading existing production lines or developing new manufacturing hubs.

South Africa's Aspen Pharmacare makes Johnson & Johnson's Covid vaccine while part state-owned Biovac will start the final stages of production of Pfizer shots later this year. Cape Town also hosts a WHO manufacturing hub that is trying to copy Moderna's Covid vaccine.

Another one of Soon-Shiong's firms, ImmunityBio, is testing a novel coronavirus vaccine candidate in South Africa that looks at priming the body's soldier T cells to kill the coronavirus.

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