

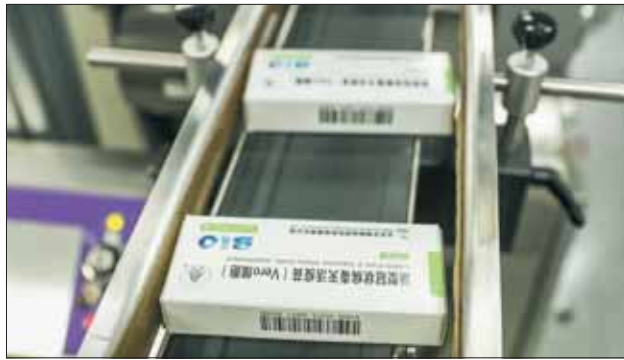
Chinese drugmaker says vaccine is 79.3% effective in final tests

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese drugmaker says its coronavirus vaccine was found to be 79.3% effective at preventing infection in preliminary data from the final round of testing, moving Beijing closer to possibly being able to fulfill its pledge to supply other developing countries.

The announcement by a unit of state-owned Sinopharm gave the first official data from a Chinese vaccine's late-stage trial. Its reported effectiveness rate is behind Pfizer Inc.'s vaccine at 95% and Moderna Inc.'s at 94%. Scientists have cautioned coronavirus vaccines may only be about as effective as flu vaccines, which generally are 50% effective.

Sinopharm is one of at least five Chinese developers that are in a global race to create vaccines for the disease that has killed more than 1.84 million people. More than 1 million healthcare workers and others in China have received vaccines developed by Sinopharm and another supplier, Sinovac, under emergency approval while testing was underway.

The two-sentence statement by the Sinopharm unit that developed the vaccine, Beijing Biological Products Institute Ltd., gave no additional details. Final proof of its



VACCINE EFFICACY. Packages of COVID-19 inactivated vaccine products are seen at a production plant of Beijing Biological Products Institute Co., Ltd, a unit of state-owned Sinopharm in Beijing. The Chinese drugmaker says its coronavirus vaccine was found to be 79.3% effective at preventing infection in preliminary data from the final round of testing. (Zhang Yuwei/Xinhua via AP)

effectiveness will depend on publication of more data. "That's useful, and at least it is showing that it is probably effective," said Jin Dong-yan, a medical professor at the University of Hong Kong.

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McDonald's sells "Spam burger" with cookie crumbs in China

BEIJING (AP) — McDonald's sold a sandwich made of Spam topped with crushed Oreo cookies in China in an attention-grabbing move that raised eyebrows.

Global brands from restaurants to automakers sometimes roll out offbeat products to appeal to Chinese tastes in the populous and intensely competitive market.

This is undoubtedly one of them.

"I thought it was delicious," said a comment signed Feifei Mao Enthusiast on the Sina Weibo microblog service. "Is that because I love McDonald's too deeply? Or is something wrong with my taste?"

The sandwich is made of two slices of Spam, a product of Hormel Foods LLC, and Mondelez International's Oreo cookies, topped with mayonnaise.

McDonald's Corp. said the sandwich was part of a series of "members only" promotions to be released on Mondays in China.

"There is no need to release unnecessary products," said a comment left on the company's microblog account. It received more than 2,000 "likes."

McDonald's said it planned to sell no more than 400,000 of the "Lunchmeat Burgers." It wasn't clear how many were sold or how many people who flooded social media with scathing comments had eaten one.

"When you hate someone but have to invite him to dinner, you can ask him to eat McDonald's Oreo lunchmeat burger," said a separate comment on Sina Weibo.

Concern among Muslims over halal status of COVID-19 vaccine

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weren't used, said Dr. Harunor Rashid, an associate professor at the University of Sydney.

There's a similar assessment by a broad consensus of religious leaders in the Orthodox Jewish community as well.

"According to the Jewish law, the prohibition on eating pork or using pork is only forbidden when it's a natural way of eating it," said Rabbi David Stav, chairman of Tzohar, a rabbinical organization in Israel.

If "it's injected into the body, not (eaten) through the mouth," then there is "no prohibition and no problem, especially when we are concerned about sicknesses," he said.

Yet there have been dissenting opinions on the issue — some with serious health consequences for Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population, some 225 million.

In 2018, the Indonesian Ulema Council, the Muslim clerical body that issues certifications that a product is halal, or permissible under Islamic law, decreed that the measles and rubella vaccines were *haram*, or unlawful, because of the gelatin. Religious and community leaders began to urge parents to not allow their children to be vaccinated.

"Measles cases subsequently spiked, giving Indonesia the third-highest rate of measles in the world," said Rachel Howard, director of the healthcare market research group Research Partnership.

A decree was later issued by the Muslim clerical body saying it was permissible to receive the vaccine, but cultural taboos still led to continued low vaccination rates, Howard said.

"Our studies have found that some Muslims in Indonesia feel uncomfortable with accepting vaccinations containing these ingredients," even when the Muslim authority issues

guidelines saying they are permitted, she said.

Governments have taken steps to address the issue. In Malaysia, where the halal status of vaccines has been identified as the biggest issue among Muslim parents, stricter laws have been enacted so that parents must vaccinate their children or face fines and jail time. In Pakistan, where there has been waning vaccine confidence for religious and political reasons, parents have been jailed for refusing to vaccinate their children against polio.

But with rising vaccine hesitancy and misinformation spreading around the globe, including in religious communities, Rashid said community engagement is "absolutely necessary."

"It could be disastrous," if there is not strong community engagement from governments and healthcare workers, he said.

In Indonesia, the government has already said it will include the Muslim clerical body in the COVID-19 vaccine procurement and certification process.

"Public communication regarding the halal status, price, quality, and distribution must be well-prepared," Indonesian President Joko Widodo said in October.

While they were in China in the fall, the Indonesian clerics inspected China's Sinovac Biotech facilities, and clinical trials involving some 1,620 volunteers are also underway in Indonesia for the company's vaccine. The government has announced several COVID-19 vaccine procurement deals with the company totalling millions of doses.

Sinovac Biotech, as well as Chinese companies Sinopharm and CanSino Biologics — which all have COVID-19 vaccines in late-stage clinical trials and deals selling millions of doses around the world — did not respond

to Associated Press requests for ingredient information.

In China, none of the COVID-19 vaccines has been granted final market approval, but more than 1 million healthcare workers and others who have been deemed at high risk of infection have received vaccines under emergency use permission. The companies have yet to disclose how effective the vaccines are or possible side effects.

Pakistan is in late-stage clinical trials of the CanSino Biologics vaccine. Bangladesh previously had an agreement with Sinovac Biotech to conduct clinical trials in the country, but the trials have been delayed due to a funding dispute. Both countries have some of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

While healthcare workers on the ground in Indonesia are still largely engaged in efforts to contain the virus as numbers continue to surge, Waqar said government efforts to reassure Indonesians will be key to a successful immunization campaign as COVID-19 vaccines are approved for use.

But, he said, companies producing the vaccines must also be part of such community outreach.

"The more they are transparent, the more they are open and honest about their product, the more likely it is that there are communities that have confidence in the product and will be able to have informed discussions about what it is they want to do," he said.

"Because, ultimately, it is the choice of individuals."

Associated Press writers Edna Tarigan in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Ilan Ben Zion in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

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