



Trump's baffling coronavirus vaccine event

By **Aaron Blake**

March 3, 2020 at 7:17 a.m. PST

As a private citizen and presidential candidate, Donald Trump was a proponent of vaccine skepticism — ignoring the scientific consensus on stuff like how vaccines don't cause autism. As president, he is now surrounded by experts on the subject, including on Monday when he held a coronavirus roundtable with his task force and the heads of several pharmaceutical companies.

Yet despite the increasingly scary situation involving the disease and preparations having been underway for weeks, he still appears rather clueless on the subject.

At the event Monday, Trump peppered the drug companies with questions that were some variant of “How fast can you get it done?” But despite this having been a focal point in recent weeks, he still didn't seem to process the fact that producing a vaccine means conducting months and months of trials before it can be deployed. He even at one point asked whether the flu vaccine could be used to combat coronavirus.

After Leonard Schleifer, the founder and chief executive of Regeneron, said his company aimed to have 200,000 doses ready by August, Trump asked him, “That means you'd be able to use the vaccine that early?” He added, “So that process would be faster than John's?” referring to another CEO.

After another CEO took a turn, Trump asked him, “So you’re talking over the next few months, you think you could have a vaccine?”

The CEO clarified that it would be ready only for phase two of testing at that point. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, added: “Yeah. You won’t have a vaccine. You’ll have a vaccine to go into testing.”

“And how long would that take?” Trump asked. The CEO said it would take months and then head into phase three. “All right. So you’re talking within a year.”

“A year to a year and a half,” Fauci again clarified.

“Well, but, Lenny is talking about two months, right?” Trump said, incorrectly referring to Schleifer’s August estimate.

“A little — a little longer,” Schleifer again clarified. “A little longer.”

“A couple of months, right?” Trump pressed. “I mean, I like the sound of a couple of months better, I must be honest with you.”

That’s when Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar cut in, again emphasizing the difference between being ready for testing and ready to deploy.

“But when you say June phase one initiation, though — right? — in June, it’s not a completed vaccine,” Azar said.

What’s remarkable about these exchanges is that Fauci has explained all of this — in front of Trump and publicly. At a White House briefing on Thursday, Fauci laid out a detailed timetable for clinical testing and concluded, “So although this is the fastest we have ever gone from a sequence of a virus to a trial, it still would not be applicable to the epidemic unless we really wait about a year to a year and a half.”

Trump on Monday eventually relented and set the goal posts at about a year from now. “So can you have it ready for next season, any of you?” he asked. “I mean, would you say, for the next season?”

Several CEOs said they hoped to, but Paul Stoffels, Johnson & Johnson’s chief scientific officer, stepped in to clarify, saying: “Yeah. But, like many people said, we have to be very careful here. If you vaccinate several hundred million people ... ”

“You’ve got to make sure it works,” Trump said.

“Works and is safe,” Stoffels said. “Yeah.”

“And it doesn’t hurt,” Trump said. “Right.”

Eventually, Trump turned to the efficacy of the potential vaccines, and again he seemed unfamiliar with how much is known at this point. He mentioned that seasonal flu vaccines are different every year, but that they are often somewhat ineffective.

“And yet, I hear numbers that are better than that with respect to corona,” Trump said. “You think you can really knock it out and that’s because you know specifically what it is, I suspect. So that’s impressive.”

Schleifer clarified that there’s still so much that is unknown. And that’s when Trump asked about whether they could just use the flu vaccine.

“But the same vaccine could not work?” he said. “You take a solid flu vaccine — you don’t think that would have an impact or much of an impact on corona?”

“No,” Schleifer replied.

“Probably not,” Fauci added.

Soon, Trump returned to his preferred months-long timetable. Asked by a reporter whether he's comfortable with this taking longer than that, Trump again sounded as though he hadn't heard everything the CEOs and experts had just told him.

"I don't think they know what the time will be," Trump said. "I've heard very quick numbers — a matter of months — and I've heard pretty much a year would be an outside number."

Again, Fauci had said a year to 18 months.

"But if you're talking about three to four months, in a couple of cases, and a year in other cases — wouldn't you say, doctor, would that be about right?" Trump said.

When a reporter pressed on whether Trump really thought the months-long timetable was viable for a vaccine, Fauci cut in. And he actually asked that the president be educated on the timetable — despite it having been told to him repeatedly.

"Would you make sure you get the president the information that a vaccine that you make and start testing in a year is not a vaccine that's deployable," Fauci said. "So he's asking the question, 'When is it going to be deployable?' And that is going to be, at the earliest, a year to a year and a half, no matter how fast you go."

Trump, though, was still skeptical.

"Do you think that's right?" he asked.

Azar emphasized that treatments but not vaccines could be available sooner, and Trump suddenly seemed more interested in that.

“Well, I think treatment, in many ways, might be more exciting,” Trump said, adding: “So the treatment, I mean, just for the media — so the treatment element of it goes faster than the vaccine element of it, which, in my opinion, in this case, would be better.”

Toward the end of the news conference, Trump was asked about the stock market recovering by about 1,300 points on Monday after a brutal last week.

“They must have heard about this meeting,” Trump said.

The meeting happened after the markets closed, though, and the Dow Jones industrial average on Tuesday was down more than 300 points.

Correction: This post initially misidentified Stoffels as CEO. It has been updated to reflect his title of chief scientific officer.

