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Pfizer's Bourla On COVID-19 Vaccine: "There Is No ROI That Will Drive Our Decision"

by **Jessica Merrill**

CEO Bourla said he has put a disproportionate weight on helping to solve the global health crisis over general drug development during a virtual event hosted by Harvard Business Review.

[Pfizer Inc.](#) CEO Albert Bourla said he has put a disproportionate weight on developing a vaccine for COVID-19 over other pipeline projects given the scope of the global health crisis. The chief executive talked about Pfizer's race to develop a vaccine for COVID-19 during a virtual Harvard Business Review event on 22 June.

"Delaying [by one] month a cancer medicine is terrible for people, but it is not the same [as] delaying two or three months a vaccine solution for COVID that could be saving the world and the economy," Bourla said. He was talking about the challenging business decisions he must make as Pfizer has rapidly pivoted to investing in the development of a COVID-19 vaccine.

The company is among the leaders in the pack developing vaccines against the novel coronavirus, working in collaboration with partner [BioNTech SE](#) on a novel messenger RNA-based vaccine. Pfizer has said it hopes to have the vaccine available for use under an emergency use authorization by October, an aggressive timeline.

(Also see "[An Ambitious COVID-19 Vaccine Development Plan For Pfizer And BioNtech](#)" - Scrip, 28 Apr, 2020.) Other drug makers including [Moderna Inc.](#), [Johnson & Johnson](#) and [AstraZeneca PLC](#) are also pushing ultra-aggressive timelines across various technology platforms. (Also see "[COVID-19: The Race To Develop A Vaccine](#)" - Scrip, 9 Jun, 2020.)

"I don't think a company of our size will break if we lose \$1bn-\$2bn, but if we are successful, I think it is absolutely the right thing to do and people will remember it," Pfizer's Bourla said.

Bourla reiterated that the company still hopes to meet the October timeline – as long as no surprises derail the effort. "I'm surprised to tell you the truth, that still the stars are aligned," he said. "So far, we are one-third or half of the way and things are still on plan."

The company expects to initiate a Phase III trial enrolling 30,000 people in July to test the vaccine. The program and timeline are similar to the Phase III trial Moderna said it would run for its messenger RNA-based vaccine candidate. (Also see "[Moderna Phase III COVID-19 Vaccine Plan To Enroll 30,000 Patients](#)" - Scrip, 11 Jun, 2020.)

When it comes to developing a vaccine for COVID-19, Bourla said it has never been about the return on investment. "There is no ROI that will drive our decision," he said.

Pfizer didn't stop to think about how much it will cost to develop, how much it will be able to produce or how it will be priced before diving headfirst into an aggressive development plan. "It was only R on effort, our return on effort," he said. "If we put effort in, we would have a certain result, then we win."

On the topic of pricing – where some industry critics are bracing for the worst – Bourla said the company started to seriously think about price in response to calls for preorders, which are already coming in.

"We decided that it is very challenging under these conditions to price it under the normal free-market type of cost/benefit," Bourla said, pointing to the "astronomical" prices a normal cost-effectiveness calculation would deliver.

"I'm leaning toward [the idea] that we will just price it like any of our other vaccines, in particular [during] the pandemic," he said. The company will have one request for governments that buy the vaccine: that it should be made available for free to the public.

"There should be no co-pays. There should be no participation of the individual if we give it at these reduced prices," Bourla said. If some countries do charge citizens for the vaccine, Bourla said Pfizer would pay for it.

Pfizer, like other drug makers rushing to develop vaccines and treatments for COVID-19, is already ramping up manufacturing supply so that it can be ready to quickly meet as much of the global demand as possible. Pfizer is investing in the development of hundreds of millions of doses, buying the materials and setting up manufacturing lines, all without knowing if the vaccine even works – an unusual shortcut in what is usually the years-long development plan for drugs and vaccines.

"If it doesn't work, it means you need to write off all of this investment and it is big money," Bourla said. "I don't think a company of our size will break if we lose \$1bn-\$2bn, but if we are successful, I think it is absolutely the right thing to do and people will remember it."

The supply and distribution of any vaccines that do reach the market quickly are expected to be challenging issues for the industry to overcome. Ramping up the supply of a vaccine to meet the demand of a global pandemic has never been tested before. Drug makers are already talking with third-party contract manufacturers and others about ways to free up manufacturing space.

Bourla called the topic of global distribution "a hot potato" that will require governments to weigh in with equitable ways to distribute the product.

Pfizer has created separate supply lines in the US and Europe to avoid any conflict in those two regions. The pharma will have three manufacturing plants involved in the production of the vaccine in the US and two in Europe. The company is also reviewing distribution plans beyond the US and Europe, he added.