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## Tories' vaccine deal goes sideways

Calgary company, contracted to produce doses in Winnipeg, says it's leaving country

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**P**remier Brian Pallister's plan to develop a homegrown vaccine to battle COVID-19 has fallen apart long before a single dose was approved.

Pallister has steadfastly defended his deal with Providence Therapeutics in the face of doubts raised by academics and politicians.

Brad Sorenson, the company's CEO, told CBC news Friday he's tired of "the runaround" from both Ottawa and provincial governments and he's ready to move Providence overseas to develop vaccines in the Southern Hemisphere.

"I'm moving on, that's where I'm at now," Sorenson is quoted as saying. "I've prostrated myself at the altar of the government in Canada for a year and I've received nothing for it. I'm tired of begging and pleading."

The province quickly assured Manitoba taxpayers they won't be on the hook for the \$7.2 million non-refundable deposit the government was to give the vaccine developer.

"Manitoba's agreement with Providence Therapeutics has not been finalized and,

as such, no payments have been made," said Blake Roberts, director of media relations and issues management of Manitoba's executive council.

In February, Pallister announced Manitoba had signed a deal with the Calgary company for two million doses of its yet-to-be-approved vaccine. He said Manitoba would make a 20 per cent down payment of the value of the contract (\$7.2 million) and pay an additional 40 per cent once the vaccine was approved by Health Canada. The balance would be paid upon delivery.

There was instant criticism.

A University of Ottawa professor told the *Free Press* at the time the company was too far behind in its development to catch up with current approved vaccines.

"In no way do I think this is realistic, and the Manitoba government is holding out very speculative, almost certainly false, hope," said Amir Attaran, a professor in the faculty of law and the school of epidemiology and public health.

"I think the prospect of Manitoba receiving vaccine from Providence by Dec.

31, which I understand to be the agreement, is in the realm of fantasy."

In an interview with the *Free Press* three weeks ago, Sorenson said enrolment in the Phase 1 trial of its messenger RNA vaccine was complete, and the preliminary data from a blinded study showed its immune response to be equal to or better than those of similar Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech products.

"If what we're seeing now is confirmed... we will have a best-in-class vaccine," he said at the time, adding the initial test data would be made public.

The office of federal Industry Minister François-Philippe Champagne noted that Ottawa had invested \$10 million to help Providence with its early trials, but placed orders only for vaccine candidates that a scientific panel deemed most likely to be effective and timely enough to immunize Canadians.

"We continue to follow Providence's progress closely, and are committed to working with the company to provide support on further milestones as results are demonstrated from their clinical trials," wrote spokesman John Power.

Manitoba could still benefit from a lo-

cally produced Providence vaccine if it goes ahead, the provincial spokesman said.

"While Providence is the developer of the vaccine, their Canadian partners Northern RNA and Emergent Biosolutions remain an integral part of Providence's vaccine production plans," Roberts said in an email.

"A finalized agreement would still result in vaccines for Manitoba being produced at Emergent's facility in Winnipeg, which supports our government's efforts to enhance domestic vaccine production."

Manitoba's Opposition party wasn't buying the government's assurances in response to Friday's news.

"Just like he rushed a plan to send teachers to North Dakota, the premier rushed into a non-refundable deal with a company no one had heard of and wasted \$7.2 million of Manitobans' money in the process," said a statement from NDP finance critic Mark Wasyliw.

"This is crony capitalism at its finest - the premier focusing on insider deals and political wins instead of rolling out a vaccine strategy that works. His bad deal means Manitobans get ripped off. That money would have been better spent on a faster vaccine rollout."

- with files from Dylan Robertson

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