

Aspen Covid vaccine lines risk going idle as J&J orders dwindle

By [Promit Mukherjee](#) and [Wendell Roelf](#)

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South Africa's Aspen Pharmacare's Covid-19 vaccine production lines may soon go idle, and without any new orders it could be forced to pivot to manufacturing other products, a senior executive said on Wednesday.



Source: Reuters A worker at Aspen Pharmacare, is seen at its Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine facility in Gqeberha.

Aspen currently produces vaccines for Johnson & Johnson and, in March, it struck a deal to produce, price, and sell its own-brand version of the shot for African markets.

That deal was considered a game-changer for a continent frustrated by sluggish Western handouts. But, while only a fifth of adults in Africa are fully vaccinated, according to the African Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, demand for shots have failed to materialise.

Aspen has had no orders for its Aspenovax vaccine, and it is not possible to predict future J&J demand, Stavros Nicolaou, Aspen group senior executive, said, leaving the future of its 450-million-dose annual production capacity in doubt.

"The thing here is that we don't know if we will get further orders from J&J. But we are producing what we currently have on order," he said.

"Intense" talks are under way with J&J as well as with bilateral organisations to secure orders soon, Nicolaou added.

Without them, he said Aspen may decide to pivot to manufacturing anesthetics or other sterile products.



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J&J said that its requirements for Aspen-produced vaccine doses was dependent upon global demand.

"This year, final quantities and delivery schedules for our vaccine are geared to the evolving needs of countries, depending on their vaccination needs and their capacity to absorb vaccines at different points in time," the company said.

Nicolaou cautioned that more critical than J&J's supply requirements was the need to jumpstart orders for Aspen's own Aspenovax.

The bulk of the company's Covid-19 production lines had been meant to produce Aspenovax for Africa. Its initial plans aimed to boost annual capacity to 700 million doses by February and a further expansion to one billion doses to meet expected demand.

However, its existing Aspenovax production lines are currently sitting idle.

"Of course we cannot continue with vacant lines indefinitely. And we would have to get orders soon or pivot," Nicolaou said.

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