

'It's been so chaotic': US government 'Operation Warp Speed' may not be focusing on developing the most promising COVID-19 vaccines

When the news broke [June 3] that Operation Warp Speed had selected five experimental COVID-19 vaccines to fast-track through testing and, potentially, mass-scale production, it was news even to some top scientists involved with the White House–led program. “It’s been so chaotic, and it’s not even transparent to those of us who are trying to help out,” says a source linked to Warp Speed who asked not to be named.

The New York Times reported that according to “senior officials,” the Trump administration program had chosen vaccines from Moderna, the University of Oxford/AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, and Merck for the crash development program, which aims to have enough safe and proven product to vaccinate 300 million Americans by January 2021.

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“It’s typical Operation Warp Speed, where everything is sort of cryptic and it’s unclear what they’re actually saying,” complains Peter Hotez, a vaccine researcher at Baylor College of Medicine who is part of a team developing a COVID-19 vaccine. “What have these vaccines been chosen to do?”

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Paul Offit, a vaccine researcher at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia who is on the same committee, says Warp Speed appears to have selected vaccines based on manufacturing concerns, not because they stand out as the most promising scientific approaches. “They’re the ones that are first because in many ways they’re the fastest ones to make,” Offit says.

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