Vaccine maker recounts ‘breakfast table’ pivot to COVID work

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BERLIN (AP) — The doctor who led development of the first COVID-19 vaccine authorized in the United States, Britain and elsewhere said her company’s decision to shift from cancer research to battling the coronavirus happened over breakfast as the possibility of a pandemic was starting to seem likely.

German company BioNTech was little-known outside the pharmaceutical industry before it teamed up with U.S. giant Pfizer for ‘Project Lightspeed’ that beat major rivals in the race to put the first thoroughly vetted vaccine on the market.

“I can remember the precise day, Jan. 24, when we made the decision at the breakfast table,” Ozlem Tureci, the chief medical officer of BioNTech said Thursday.

In a video call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other officials, Tureci recounted how her husband and business partner, Ugur Sahin, predicted that the outbreak of a mysterious respiratory illness in the Chinese city of Wuhan had all the ingredients for a global pandemic.

“He alerted all of us and made us, that is the entire company, the supervisory board, the company’s owners, pivot from cancer therapy to this program and divert our resources to developing a vaccine,” she said.

Tureci and Sahin also credited the new approach used for the vaccine, which is based on mRNA technology they had been working on for decades, and the close collaboration with Pfizer.

“We knew we didn’t have the capacity to conduct very quick clinical studies with more than 40,000 volunteers,” said Sahin. “And that’s why we entered into a partnership with a company that’s been doing this for decades and is leading in the field, Pfizer.”

U.K. regulators gave BioNTech’s vaccine emergency authorization on Dec. 2, based on submissions that included data showing an efficacy rate of 95%. The U.S. FDA followed suit on Dec. 11, while the European regulator EMA plans to meet next week to decide on an approval request that Germany’s health minister has said could see vaccinations start Dec. 27.

Tureci said data from some 140,000 people who have so far received the first doses of the vaccine in Britain showed it was tolerated as well as during the trials.

Merkel, a physicist by training, praised Tureci and Sahin for persisting with their research into the use of mRNA to prime the human immune system to fight off diseases.

“You stuck to your guns,” the German chancellor said. “You believed in your technology.”

The bet paid off not just for Mainz-based BioNTech, but also for the company’s early backers who saw the potential for drugs that are tailor-made for specific diseases.

“We decided to make a huge investment, put the blinds down, close the doors and have the company work,” Matthias Kromayer, general partner at Munich-based MIG AG, told The Associated Press.

MIG expects to get a return of 50 to 100 times the 13.5 million euros ($16.6 million) it originally spent on buying a 6% stake in BioNTech more than a decade ago, he said.

The company’s biggest shareholder is Germany’s Struengmann family, while Sahin and Tureci hold about 18% of the total.

BioNTech said many of its staff will be working through the festive period to ensure doses are swiftly shipped.

“We are confident that if we work together we will be able to live a normal life again next winter and there won’t be a need anymore to go into a shutdown,” said chief executive Sahin.

Once the pandemic is over, Tureci hopes to focus again on tackling cancer and other major diseases.

“When this mission is completed we long to return to our original vision, which is (to develop) immune therapies for cancer patients and for other infectious diseases such as HIV and TBC (tuberculosis),” she said.