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Crisis, what crisis? Curevac denies everything

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As a Covid-19 vaccine exclusivity and senior management storm engulfs Curevac, the German mRNA specialist insists it’s just conjecture and coincidence.

If Moderna, which yesterday began a trial of its mRNA-1273 vaccine, stands as one of the few biotechs to have taken real action against Covid-19, the drama has come from its German mRNA rival, Curevac.

It all started early this month, when Curevac trumpeted the fact it had been called to discuss development of a Covid-19 vaccine with president Donald Trump and members of the US coronavirus task force. But within 13 days the group was embroiled in an international squabble over who should own such a vaccine, and not one but two of its chief executives had departed.

What exactly had happened? Today a press briefing, which Curevac admitted it had convened because it was struggling to cope with the volume of questions it had received, shed very little light on the affair, the company effectively insisting that management turnover was pure coincidence.

Exclusive?

A central question is what precisely president Trump had proposed to Curevac as regards developing an mRNA vaccine against Covid-19.

Shortly after the White House talks took place reports emerged that Curevac had been offered a $1bn deal to provide such a vaccine exclusively for the US. This elicited outrage from German government officials, who insisted that Germany was “not for sale”.

Today, Curevac denied the whole affair. “We don’t know how the media picked this up,” said its supervisory board member Friedrich von Bohlen. “We reject that we had, at any time, an offer from Trump or any government organisation. This is just not right. I don’t know where [the $1bn offer of exclusivity] came from.”

Unfortunately for Curevac, quotes by senior German officials including the interior minister, Horst Seehofer, and the group’s primary investor, Dietmar Hopp, seem to have implicitly confirmed White House attempts to court Curevac with offers of exclusivity.

Curevac today said Mr Hopp was “kind of summarising and integrating all the information he had heard. Where the information came from, even we don’t know,” said Mr von Bohlen.

Curevac also issued a statement insisting that its Covid-19 vaccine focus was a product “to protect people worldwide”, and yesterday tweeted its outright denial.
Still, the plot had thickened on March 11, when the group announced that its chief executive, Daniel Menichella, was suddenly being replaced by its founder and former chief, Ingmar Hoerr. It was Mr Menichella who had been invited to the White House talks.

Today Mr von Bohlen said it had been in the company's best interests for Mr Hoerr to step back into the CEO role, given his specific mRNA knowledge as the company's scientific founder. “This was not Dan’s sweet sport of expertise,” said Mr von Bohlen, adding that Mr Menichella had been invited to Washington on 24 hours' notice.

But yesterday events took an even more bizarre twist when – five days after being named chief executive – Mr Hoerr took a temporary leave of absence for medical reasons.

Mr von Bohlen's explanation? “This was a pure coincidence of things and of timelines,” he told the press briefing. He said he could not estimate for how long Mr Hoerr might be out, but stressed that he had not contracted coronavirus.

Curevac has called this situation “unexpected”, which is probably an understatement. As for the full truth of whether a battle has waged between Germany and the US over its ownership, this will unlikely emerge unless recordings of the White House talks are made public.