

The Husband-and-Wife Team Behind the Leading Vaccine to Solve Covid-19

The German company BioNTech, founded by two scientists, has teamed up with Pfizer on a vaccine that was found to be more than 90 percent effective.



By David Gelles

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Two years ago, Dr. Ugur Sahin took the stage at a conference in Berlin and made a bold prediction. Speaking to a roomful of infectious disease experts, he said his company might be able to use its so-called messenger RNA technology to rapidly develop a vaccine in the event of a global pandemic.

At the time, Dr. Sahin and his company, BioNTech, were little known outside the small world of European biotechnology start-ups. BioNTech, which Dr. Sahin founded with his wife, Dr. Özlem Türeci, was mostly focused on cancer treatments. It had never brought a product to market. Covid-19 did not yet exist.

But his words proved prophetic.

On Monday, BioNTech and Pfizer announced that a vaccine for the coronavirus developed by Dr. Sahin and his team was more than 90 percent effective in preventing the disease among trial volunteers who had no evidence of having previously been infected. The stunning results vaulted BioNTech and Pfizer to the front of the race to find a cure for a disease that has killed more than 1.2 million people worldwide.

“It could be the beginning of the end of the Covid era,” Dr. Sahin said in an interview on Tuesday.

BioNTech began work on the vaccine in January, after Dr. Sahin read an article in the medical journal *The Lancet* that left him convinced that the coronavirus, at the time spreading quickly in parts of China, would explode into a full-blown pandemic.

Scientists at the company, based in Mainz, Germany, canceled vacations and set to work on what they called Project Lightspeed.

“There are not too many companies on the planet which have the capacity and the competence to do it so fast as we can do it,” Dr. Sahin said in an interview last month. “So it felt not like an opportunity, but a duty to do it, because I realized we could be among the first coming up with a vaccine.”

After BioNTech had identified several promising vaccine candidates, Dr. Sahin concluded that the company would need help to rapidly test them, win approval from regulators and bring the best candidate to market. BioNTech and Pfizer had been working together on a flu vaccine since 2018, and in March, they agreed to collaborate on a coronavirus vaccine.



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