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London, December 2 (RHC)-- Britain on Wednesday became the first country to approve a COVID-19 vaccine for general use, announcing a rollout of Pfizer-BioNTech's jab from next week in a historic advance for humanity's fightback against the coronavirus.

"It's the protection of vaccines that will ultimately allow us to reclaim our lives and get the economy moving again," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said after the approval by the UK's independent medicines regulator. But he urged the public to remain cautious on the day that England exited a four-week lockdown and re-imposed regional curbs.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said that starting with care home residents and health and care staff, Britain's National Health Service will begin with 800,000 doses "early next week" and ramp up to "millions"

of inoculations by the end of the year.

"Help is on its way," he told BBC radio. "We can see the dawn in the distance but we have to get through to the morning," Hancock added, underscoring the appeal for the public to continue adhering to social restrictions.

England's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, also welcomed the "excellent news" but stressed, "It will take until spring until the vulnerable population who wish to be fully vaccinated. We can't lower our guard yet." The breakthrough will encourage hopes the world can finally get back on course in 2021 after a year of traumatic losses, both human and economic.

The novel coronavirus has killed nearly 1.5 million people since the outbreak emerged in China 12 months ago. At least 63 million cases have been registered.

Pfizer chief executive Albert Bourla said the certification by the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) was a "historic moment in the fight against COVID -19." "This authorization is a goal we have been working toward since we first declared that science will win, and we applaud the MHRA for their ability to conduct a careful assessment and take timely action to help protect the people of the UK," he said.

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