Biden offers platitudes while Omicron coronavirus variant spreads in US

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2 December 2021

In reports reminiscent of February 2020, several new cases of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus have been detected in the United States, including one in Minnesota, one in Colorado and five in New York. The emergence of these cases indicates, as noted by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, that "there is community spread of the variant" in the city and across the country.

The case in Colorado was traced to a traveler who had returned from South Africa, similar to the first detected case in California. The case in Minnesota, however, is the first known case of community transmission in the United States. The patient is suspected to have been infected in New York City, where he attended the Anime NYC 2021 convention at the Javits Center from November 19–21. The sources of the five cases in New York are currently unknown.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also reported that the Minnesota patient had received his booster dose in early November, an indication that this latest variant is at least partially resistant to even a triple-dose of the existing vaccines.

The dangers posed by a vaccine-resistant variant were ignored in Biden's so-called COVID-19 winter plan, announced December 2 in remarks given at the National Institutes of Health. He began with a flat rejection of the type of measures that could eliminate the virus in a matter of months, including lockdowns and school shutdowns. "It doesn't involve shutdowns or lockdowns, but widespread vaccinations, and boosters, and testing and a lot more," Biden said.

The plan outlines an approach to the winter months, expected to see a massive increase in infections, by continuing the same policies that have already proven ineffective: expanded vaccine access for children, booster access for adults, further testing and extended mask requirements on public transportation. When asked after his remarks about a potential shutdown to stem the spread of the variant, and the virus in general, Biden responded, "I don't think that will happen."

Biden's remarks are a continuation of his administration's overall policy toward the pandemic, above all nothing that impinges on the financial interests of Wall Street and the major corporations. This was made explicit in the White House statement preceding Biden's remarks, which asserted that, "We have the public health tools we need to continue to fight this virus without shutting down our schools and businesses."

Perhaps his most significant statement was this: "Experts say that COVID-19 cases will continue to rise in the weeks ahead and this winter … So we need to be ready." Given the lethality of the currently dominant Delta variant, a rise in cases means a rise in hospitalizations and deaths, crippling the health care system, which is already overwhelmed in states like Michigan, and leading inexorably to daily death tolls in the thousands.

Rather than lift a finger to prevent this outcome, Biden bemoaned the intervention of federal judges to block his proposed vaccine mandate for employees of large corporations, and the right-wing political opposition to mask mandates and other public health measures, calling it a "sad, sad commentary."

In other words, beyond a further push for vaccinations and expanded testing, it will be business as usual in the United States. The policies that have caused nearly 50 million infections and at least 806,000 deaths in just the US will continue unabated. Markets responded favorably to Biden's plan; the Dow Jones jumped 617 points today, making up for much of this week's losses.

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The Omicron variant also continues to spread internationally. The World Health Organization reports that the variant has been detected in 26 countries, ranging from Botswana to South Korea, Ireland and the United States. The epicenter continues to be in South Africa, where 11,535 new cases were reported today, an eight-fold increase over the past eight days. Deaths are also on the rise, doubling over the past two weeks to an average of 30 each day.

Hospitalizations are also on the rise. South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reports that there are currently 2,904 patients admitted, an increase of 274 over the past day. In addition, ten percent of those admitted in Tshwane, where most of the current Omicron cases are located in South Africa, are of children aged 2 and under.

Waasila Jassat, public health specialist at the NICD, told Bloomberg that because "very young children have an immature immune system and they are also not vaccinated … they are more at risk."

A further danger of the Omicron variant is the threat of multiple reinfections of the coronavirus. A preprint study in medRxiv, "Increased risk of SARS-CoV-2 reinfection associated with emergence of the Omicron variant in South Africa," found that the chance for reinfection from the Omicron variant is 2.4 times higher than for previous variants. They documented 35,000 cases of patients with at least one reinfection in South Africa, along with 332 cases of a second reinfection—that is those people were infected with coronavirus three separate times.

The dangers of reinfection cannot be understated. To date, there have been more than 264 million cases worldwide and at least 5.2 million dead. Each day, more than 560,000 new cases are confirmed and more than 8,000 people die. A variant which can freely cause reinfections and evades immunity will essentially restart the pandemic, accelerating the current wave of death to new and more tragic heights.

Such dangers are already emerging in South Africa. Data collated by the *Financial Times* shows that two weeks since the Omicron wave began in South Africa, the seven-day average of new cases is increasing at a rate about triple that of the previous wave. Similarly, genome sequencing of the coronavirus indicates that more than 90 percent of cases in the country are of the Omicron variant. It took the Delta variant nearly 100 days to reach such dominance.

Put another way, early estimates show that the Omicron variant is three to six times as infectious as the Delta variant. If these figures are borne out, Omicron will prove to be more infectious than measles.

And while no deaths have been so far attributed to the Omicron variant, in South Africa or elsewhere, no confidence can be given to the empty platitudes of those such as Angelique Coetzee, chair of the South African Medical Association, that "I think it will be a mild disease, hopefully." The variants of SARS-CoV-2 that spread across the world, particularly the Alpha, Gamma and Delta variants, have all proven to be more infectious and deadly than their predecessors.

There is no reason to believe that Omicron will be any different. As leading scientists and the *World Socialist Web Site* have warned, vaccinations are necessary but not sufficient to stop the spread of COVID-19. The only way out of the unending cycle of new variants, renewed pandemics and spiraling death tolls is a globally coordinated campaign of the most stringent public health measures to eliminate the virus from human circulation and ultimately eradicate the deadly disease.

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