WHO says that Omicron could become the dominant variant globally

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According to a press release on Friday by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Omicron variant (B.1.1.529), first detected in South Africa in early November, has now been found in 38 countries across all six WHO regions. Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, WHO's chief scientist, explained that though "it is possible that it [Omicron] could become the dominant variant [globally]," Delta still accounts for 99 percent of all infections worldwide.

Cases globally continue to surge, with more than 266 million cumulative reported cases and over 5.27 million deaths. Delta continues to take its toll on the populations of North America and Europe. The daily average number of cases has continued its steady climb for nearly two months, reaching more than 600,000 cases per day worldwide. Deaths have held constant at a horrific rate of around 7,000 per day.

In the United States, cumulative cases will top 50 million this week. Deaths are approaching 810,000, according to the Worldometer COVID dashboard. Meanwhile, the number of daily COVID cases is fast approaching 150,000 once more. The seven-day average of cases is over 106,000, and the rate of daily deaths has turned upwards, nearing 1,200 on a daily average.

In Europe, more than 88 million COVID cases and 1.56 million deaths have been reported. Weekly cases have been rising for more than nine straight weeks, with close to 400,000 cases on a daily average. Though there are indications that deaths have plateaued, they remain disastrously high at around 30,000 per week or more than 4,200 per day.

In East Asia, countries that had been able to control the coronavirus up to now face their most dire period in the pandemic. South Korea had a single-day high of 5,352 cases and 70 deaths on December 4. Infections are growing exponentially there, and deaths are rapidly rising. Further south, Vietnam and Thailand continue to battle recent surges.

Despite these developments, the world is focused on the current concerns raised by the highly mutated and transmissible Omicron variant. As bad as Delta has been, the incredibly rapid rates of infections caused by Omicron in South Africa have gripped public attention. According to the initial contact with this variant, it has far outpaced any of its previous predecessors.

According to Angelique Coetzee, the South African Medical Association chair, the effective reproduction number (R) for Omicron has been estimated to be above six. Speaking with *the BBC*, she said, "We know currently that the virus is transmissible. According to the scientists, the R-value is 6.3, I think." The value for Delta was just over five.

Since scientists there first detected the Omicron on November 9, when the daily average was just 266 cases, infection rates in South Africa have risen 32-fold at 8,861 new cases per day. Cases are doubling every three days. Accompanying this trend has been a concerning rise in hospitalizations of children under the age of five, underscoring the issue that children are not only able to become infected, but they can become very ill.

During a press conference, Dr. Waasila Jassat, Public Health Medicine Specialist who works at South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases, said, "All these young children being admitted, most of them, the parents have not been vaccinated either. So, I think, certainly the value of vaccination in the adults, protecting the children in the homes, is something to keep in mind."

Infants under the age of two account for about ten percent of hospital admissions in Tshwane, the epicenter of the Omicron outbreak in South Africa. The incidence of admissions for children under five is second only to those over the age of 60. Dr. Jassat explained that more than 100 children under the age of five were admitted in the first two weeks of the fourth wave. In the first two weeks of the country's third wave, less than 20 children had been hospitalized.

Rather than taking the appropriate public health measures to stem this massive tide of infections, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa is pressing for a vaccine

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mandate. Only a quarter of the country's population is fully vaccinated. Meanwhile, Health Minister Joe Phaala has attempted to control the messaging on these developments by assuring the public that even though Omicron is more transmissible, it is "less severe."

GISAID, which is tracking SARS-CoV-2 variants globally, noted that 35 countries have thus far submitted sequences confirming the presence of the Omicron variant. South Africa has submitted 228 sequences, accounting for almost 80 percent of all submissions. The United Kingdom has submitted 84, Ghana 33, the US 27, and Botswana 23. In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that 15 states had detected the Omicron variant.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, speaking on ABC News on Sunday, said, "We know we have several dozen cases, and we're following them closely. And we are hearing about more and more probable cases every day, so that number is likely to rise." And this statement comes on the heels of ever-rising cases of infections caused by the Delta variant.

Walensky's insistence that SARS-CoV-2 will become endemic in the US must be seen by the working class as an abdication of her responsibility to protect the population. It is a political statement that assures the ruling class that the policy of the CDC is aligned with that of the financial oligarchs. Omicron will be treated no differently than Delta or any future variants.

In Europe, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Luxembourg, Ireland, and the Czech Republic have reported cases. The European CDC's December 2, 2021, threat assessment brief noted that more than 70 cases had been confirmed by 13 European Union and European Economic Area countries by the time of their report. These are, by now, a vast undercounting, as several superspreader events have already been confirmed.

According to a Norwegian public health official, at a recent Christmas party in Norway where 120 people had joined in the festivities, more than half have been infected by Omicron. Dr. Preben Aavitsland said, "This party has been a superspreader event. Our working hypothesis is that at least half of the 120 participants were infected with the Omicron variant during the party. This makes this, *for now*, the largest Omicron outbreak outside South Africa." [Emphasis added]

The European CDC made the following prediction in their brief: "…preliminary data from South Africa suggests that it may have a substantial growth advantage over the Delta variant of concern (VOC). If this is the case, mathematical modeling indicates that the Omicron VOC is expected to cause over half of all SARS-CoV-2 infections in the EU/EEA within the next few months."

They added, "The presence of multiple mutations in the spike protein of the Omicron VOC indicates a high likelihood of reduction of neutralizing activity of antibodies induced by infection or vaccination. Preliminary data suggest that the Omicron VOC may be associated with increased risk of reinfection in South Africa." The statement is based on a recent study out of South Africa that showed a very high rate of reinfection, implying that Omicron can evade immunity from previous infections and vaccinations.

What is less clear is if infection with Omicron will produce less, the same, or more severity than Delta. The Technical Lead at the WHO, Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, noted that it was still too early to make sense of the severity caused by Omicron. Generally, children and young adults will have mild symptoms, and inferences in populations that have been vaccinated or previously infected with other variants will muddy attempts to concretize these questions in the initial period. She said, "There were initial reports that it tended to be more mild, but it's really too soon."

Dr. Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO's health emergencies program, echoed his colleague's caution: "It takes time, unfortunately. We saw that as well in previous waves of this pandemic. When the incidence rate goes up, it takes a week or two for that to result in hospital admissions and deaths."

In North America, besides the US, Mexico and Canada have also reported the new variant. Cases have also been found throughout Southeast Asia, Japan, Brazil, and Australia. By all accounts, many countries that lack comprehensive sequencing capacity are more than likely harboring Omicron. It is more than sure that this new variant has been deeply seeded in communities throughout the globe.

Indeed, despite the concerns raised by Omicron, country after country continues to take a cavalier attitude to these developments, a situation that could evolve into a two-strain pandemic, with Delta and Omicron acting side-by-side, rather than one displacing the other. As noted by numerous principled scientists, the reliance on a vaccine-only strategy is shortsighted and irrational. It amounts to calling for the population to get vaccinated and hoping for the best. The logic remains that the stock markets must remain unfettered by the risks posed by these deadly variants to the planet's population.

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