

UK government announces first confirmed Omicron variant death in the world

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13 December 2021

Britain has announced the first publicly confirmed death globally from the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

Speaking Monday at the Stowe Health Vaccination centre in West London, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, said, “Sadly yes Omicron is producing hospitalisations and sadly at least one patient has been confirmed to have died with Omicron.”

“The idea that this is somehow a milder version of the virus, I think that's something we need to set on one side,” he admitted.

It has taken just 16 days since the Omicron variant was first detected in Britain, two people in Chelmsford and Nottingham on November 27, for it to be almost dominant in London, with a population of 10 million, and to claim its first life.

On Sunday evening, Johnson confirmed in a televised address that there were hospitalisations due to Omicron in Britain. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said on Monday that 10 people were in hospital with the variant in England and that the individuals had been diagnosed on or before admission.

The UKHSA said those hospitalised come from across the UK with ages ranging between 18 and 85 years. Confirming how dangerous Omicron is, it said that the majority of the 10 people in hospital had already received two vaccination doses. With another 1,576 Omicron cases reported Monday, there were 4,713 confirmed cases of the variant in Britain.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid told BBC Radio's *Today* show, “This variant is growing at a phenomenal rate. We haven't seen anything like this before. We expect 1 million infections by the end of this month.”

He later told Parliament that the variant already accounted for 44 percent of cases of COVID in London and 20 percent of cases throughout England, and that “we expect it to become the dominant COVID-19 variant in the capital in the next 48 hours.”

Even these figures do not accurately represent the spread of the most virulent strain of COVID yet detected. Javid told Parliament that it is estimated, based on modelling, that the current number of daily Omicron infections is around 200,000, equating to 1.4 million a week, or at least 6 million a month at the present rate of infection.

The *Daily Mail* reported that government data show that “cases are growing by up to 48 per cent a week in the worst-hit boroughs of the capital, which include Barking and Dagenham, Hackney and City of London and Greenwich. Meanwhile, the highest infection rates, where 0.7 percent of the local population has tested positive in the past week, have been recorded in Sutton, Richmond upon Thames and Bromley.”

While the UK death from Omicron is the first announced by a government, such is the spread of the variant globally that it is very likely many people have already died from it elsewhere in the world. The variant is present in at least 57 countries on every continent, including 11 in Africa.

In South Africa, there has been a sharp rise in excess deaths in the country since Omicron was detected. South Africa first reported the Omicron variant (B.1.1.529) to the World Health Organisation (WHO) on November 24, 2021. According to a South African Medical Research Council report published last week, excess deaths nearly doubled in the week beginning November 28. Some 2,076 weekly excess deaths from natural causes were recorded, compared with 1,091 excess deaths from natural causes the week before. The data showing the huge increase is taken from a week that began just four days after the variant was first reported to the WHO, having been circulating within the population prior to that.

Though the African National Congress government has not acknowledged any Omicron deaths in a hospital setting, the marked increase in excess deaths points to

many being killed by the variant at home.

In response to the staggering spread of COVID in Britain, Johnson's Conservative government is acting as it has done throughout the pandemic in pursuing a herd immunity policy that has already cost almost 170,000 lives. When the virus was first detected, Johnson said there was no need to even impose limited "Plan B" measures and that the situation would be reviewed in three weeks. With nothing done, the virus spread unhindered throughout the population, exacerbated by the busy pre-Christmas shopping period. Predictably Omicron claimed the life of the first Briton well before the three weeks were up.

Under Plan B, masks are mandatory in most indoor venues, including theatres and cinemas but not pubs, clubs and restaurants, from Friday. A vaccine pass or proof of a negative test will be required to enter nightclubs and other venues where large groups of people can continue to gather, including at outside venues with more than 10,000 people. Neither Plan B nor Johnson's announcement Sunday of an escalation in the vaccination booster rollout will stop the spread of the variant, with the economy remaining fully open, including all public transport networks, and schools kept open.

The football season is being allowed to continue, despite clubs reporting a record number of COVID cases among regularly tested players and staff, with tens of thousands of fans being herded into stadiums. Manchester United, who have so many COVID cases that they have been forced to postpone an away fixture this week in London, have a stadium capacity of 75,000 with the venue full every game.

Despite it being known for months that a surge in COVID cases was to be expected in the winter, even without a new variant, the government put nothing in place. National Health Service (NHS) leaders who had previously been told that all those above the age of 30 should be vaccinated within seven weeks were suddenly informed over the weekend that they must inoculate everyone aged over 18 in just three weeks—more than 20 million people.

Predictably, the booster acceleration plan was thrown into crisis on its first day, Monday, with the dedicated NHS website crashing as millions tried to book appointments. Huge queues formed outside vaccination centres, with people waiting hours in the winter cold, including hundreds at St Thomas' Hospital in London which is adjacent to the National Covid Memorial Wall.

Due to a substantial section of the ruling Conservative

Party's MPs having secured a concession from Johnson months ago that any COVID measures impacting the economy must be approved by Parliament, Johnson's Plan B will not even be voted on until Tuesday evening. According to reports, up to 75 Tory MPs are prepared to vote against some or all the limited measures, with the government having to rely on the support of the Labour opposition to pass the legislation.

To reassure the Tory rebels and the corporations ahead of the vote, Javid stressed that "Even with Plan B, we still have far fewer restrictions in place than Europe."

That the government remains committed to a herd immunity agenda and COVID becoming endemic in the population was confirmed in Downing Street's maniacal statement Monday that schools must remain open for the rest of term and that it would only order them closed in the "darest emergency".

Yesterday, Labour doubled down on supporting a government it has kept in power throughout the pandemic through a policy of "constructive criticism". Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting said the government target of 1 million booster vaccinations per day over the next weeks may be impossible, "but we applaud the ambition". He added of the under resourced National Health Service, whose staff cannot cope and who still don't have full and routine access to the highest standard of PPE necessary to treat COVID victims, "If anyone can do it, the NHS can and the whole country will be willing them on and will not knock them for trying."

Labour provided another service for the government on Monday, facilitating its drive to end all travel restrictions for those arriving in Britain, with Labour MP Ben Bradshaw complaining in Parliament that they were "very draconian, costly and complex". Javid replied, "I think [Bradshaw] makes a very good point, given that we already know that the Omicron variant is fast becoming the dominant variant in our capital city, spreading rapidly throughout the country, the justification for having those rules is minimised. It's something that I've already raised with my colleagues in the Department for Transport, and I do hope that we can act quickly."



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