

Surge of the BA.5 Omicron subvariant sweeps Europe, North and South America, Japan

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The International Health Regulation (IHR) emergency committee on COVID-19 met on July 1, 2022 and concluded that the coronavirus continues to be a public health emergency of international concern. Yet, across every region of the globe, outside of China, there is official disregard of the warnings raised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and indifference to the immediate and long-term impact COVID-19 will have on the planet's population.

In this regard, White House Chief Medical Adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci's comments to *Politico* on his impending retirement at the end of President Joe Biden's term were remarkable for their frankness. "We're in a pattern now," he said. "If somebody says, 'You'll leave when we don't have COVID anymore,' then I will be 105. I think we're going to be living with this." Fauci is 81 years old, which means he suggests the world faces another quarter century of the COVID-19 pandemic, truly a counsel of despair.

Infections, hospitalizations and deaths have continued their climb during the summer months, with Europe being the current epicenter of the latest surges. These are being caused by the latest subvariant of Omicron, the immune-evading and highly infectious BA.5.

Meanwhile, the daily rate of the population receiving COVID-19 vaccines doses globally has plummeted to the lowest level since boosters began, indicating that this strategy to stem infections and severe disease has been thoroughly exhausted. Despite nearly 100 percent population "immunity" from vaccines and previous infections in many countries, repeated waves of infections in quick succession are now understood to be the new reality.

Global weekly cases have nearly doubled since the end of May, with 6.3 million cases for the week ending July 4. Official deaths from COVID-19 also climbed nearly 25 percent in the same period, reaching a weekly worldwide count of almost 11,000. However, estimates of excess deaths suggest these figures are gross undercounts, in large part due to country after country having dismantled their COVID-19 trackers. While the official COVID-19 death toll globally remains at two-year lows of around 1,900 each day, daily

excess deaths are seven times higher at 13,000. Notably, the "mid-range" estimate for total excess deaths, according to *The Economist's* tracker, has reached 22 million.

Germany, in particular, has had little respite between Omicron waves. Daily cases bounced back up to nearly 100,000 cases this month after rapidly declining in May. Deaths are surging as well. According to the Robert Koch Institute, acute respiratory illness remains unseasonably elevated. They estimate that somewhere between 800,000 and 1.3 million people are actively infected with SARS-CoV-2. BA.5 accounts for 83 percent of all COVID-19 cases. As hospital beds are quickly filling with patients, nurses and health care workers are falling ill with COVID-19, placing additional strain on overburdened health care systems.

Nurse Georg Goutrie, speaking with *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, said, "In Germany, we average about 13 patients per nurse; while in Holland, for example, there are only five. How am I supposed to take responsibility for 13 patients at once and still provide high-quality care?" The German Economic Institute expected nursing staff shortages of more than 300,000 by 2035. Years of pandemic on top of low wages and health care shortages will have catastrophic consequences for Germany and every other country facing a similar crisis.

France and Italy are facing similar repercussions of the policy of allowing the virus to spread without any consideration for the public's well-being.

In Greece, amid a deepening surge of BA.5, the government last week suddenly announced a switch to weekly reporting of cases, deaths and other COVID-19 data, prompting the seven-day averages of infections and deaths to rapidly fall to zero on Sunday. Public health officials have essentially closed their books on the pandemic. As the *National Herald* succinctly noted, "Effectively ending a pandemic that's still ongoing, Greece's New Democracy government, which pulled back health measures against COVID-19, said that tourists who are infected won't be quarantined but free to walk about."

The one consistent aspect of the ruling elite's rhetoric on the pandemic has been the repeated minimization of the dangers posed to children.

In the UK, COVID-19 hospitalizations are returning to previous highs reached during the Omicron BA.1 surge last winter, at close to 20 admissions per 100,000 people per week. Admissions of children under the age of five are soaring and constitute the majority of pediatric hospitalizations. They are only surpassed by those 65 years and older. Even if children do not die at the same rate as the elderly, the disease has an immediate and chronic toll on children.

In the United States, hospital admissions for those under 18 will soon surpass the peaks reached during the Delta wave last fall.

Dr. Ziyad Al-Aly, a nephrologist and epidemiological researcher at Washington University Medical Center in St. Louis who has been tracking Long COVID, noted recently that children can suffer from brain fog, fatigue and malaise, as well as dangerous consequences that include acute liver failure, multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) and diabetes. The impact on their vital organs can have long-term consequences even decades later as they face the prospect of numerous repeated infections.

Eastern Europe and the United States have always trailed Western Europe by a few weeks in the impact of the pandemic. While Poland, Romania, Czechia and Hungary are seeing the emergence of new surges of infections, in the US the seven-day average in cases has been steadily climbing and the seven-day average in deaths has surpassed 400 per day. Hospitalizations are now over 40,000, and the test positivity rate has reached 17 percent. This is consistent with the rise in wastewater data that is 10 times above the lows seen at the end of March. According to former FDA Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb, real daily infections could now be as high as a million per day.

The current surge of BA.5 in Japan has seen daily cases reach new pandemic highs. New COVID-19 cases had reached a single-day high of over 110,000 last Saturday, and the seven-day average soared to just shy of 90,000, close to the record of 94,000 reached on February 8, 2022. The curve in deaths is also turning up. In Okinawa prefecture, 60 percent of beds are filled, affecting the local health care system's ability to manage other health-related issues. Hospital admissions are also rebounding in Tokyo, the capital and population center. Japanese authorities are facing the consequences of dealing with the strain on their health care systems while avoiding imposing any restrictions on activities.

South Korea, too, is in the early phase of another surge of infections after the massive wave of infections in March

with the BA.2 subvariant. The seven-day average of cases is up five-fold from last month. The country, like most, dismantled nearly every mitigation measure after the first bout with Omicron. There are no immediate plans to reimplement them unless there is a "critical change," according to Minister Han Duck-soo.

In Latin America, Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala, Argentina and Mexico are facing similar consequences.

Peru, which has faced the highest per capita death toll of any country in the pandemic, has seen a sudden jump in COVID-19 cases. Health Minister Jorge Lopez estimated that under a moderate scenario, Peru could see thousands more deaths added to its already devastating figure of 213,685.

In Guatemala, COVID-19 cases are at pandemic highs with a seven-day average in cases far above the peaks from last summer. Only 38 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, a product of vaccine hesitancy. Nancy Notz, a nurse working at a vaccination clinic sponsored by the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security, told *Nature*, "A lot of people still aren't getting vaccinated as they think that it's going to damage their health, kill them, or because their church told them not to." Nearly a million Guatemalans have reportedly been infected, and 18,500 have died. However, these are underestimates due to the lack of testing.

Mexico is facing a similarly precarious situation as the latest surge in infections will soon outpace the first Omicron wave. With almost 440,000 reportedly killed by infection, COVID-19 was the leading cause of death in 2020 and 2021. However, all-cause mortality was estimated at over 600,000. In a recent article published in *The Lancet Regional Health Americas*, there was a significant spike in deaths caused by diabetes, respiratory infections, ischemic heart disease and high blood pressures.

These deadly trends will continue as chronic maladies for Mexicans and the rest of the world's populations who have thus far been forced to acquiesce to living with repeated infections and illness. The virus has adapted itself to the policies established by the capitalist ruling classes, making it clear that only a movement of the working class can force a change to a policy of eliminating COVID-19.



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