

COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

29th Nov 2021

Lockdown Exit

WHO reaches draft consensus on future pandemic treaty

Member states of the World Health Organization have reached a tentative consensus to negotiate a future agreement on preventing pandemics, bridging the gap between sides led by the European Union and United States, diplomats said on Sunday. The draft resolution, hammered out in negotiations over the weekend, will be presented for adoption to health ministers at the WHO's three-day special assembly that opens on Monday, they said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-reaches-draft-consensus-future-pandemic-treaty-2021-11-28/>

China study warns of 'colossal' COVID outbreak if it opens up like U.S., France

China could face more than 630,000 COVID-19 infections a day if it dropped its zero-tolerance policies by lifting travel curbs, according to a study by Peking University mathematicians. In the report published in China CDC Weekly by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the mathematicians said China could not afford to lift travel restrictions without more efficient vaccinations or specific treatments. Using data for August from the United States, Britain, Spain, France and Israel, the mathematicians assessed the potential results if China adopted the same pandemic control tactics as those countries.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-study-warns-colossal-covid-outbreak-if-it-opens-up-like-us-france-2021-11-28/>

Aussie vaccine researchers rush to include Omicron in jab development

Australian vaccine researchers will be putting the Omicron coronavirus variant under the microscope, with experts saying the rise of the new strain highlights the urgent need for sovereign vaccine manufacturing. The emergence of Omicron has prompted the companies that make COVID-19 vaccines for Australia, including Pfizer and BioNTech and Moderna, to evaluate the efficacy of their products against the variant. Pfizer said it expects new data on the variant within a fortnight and would be able to tailor a new vaccine-specific variant within 100 days if it is found to be necessary. Nasdaq-listed Moderna, which is planning to set up operations in Australia, has said it is using a three-pronged strategy against Omicron. The company will evaluate data from a stronger booster shot of its original vaccine to see whether it is effective against the new strain. It is also studying two multi-variant booster candidates and will start work on an Omicron-specific booster in coming weeks.

<https://www.theage.com.au/business/companies/aussie-vaccine-researchers-rush-to-include-omicron-in-jab-development-20211128-p59crs.html>

Covid: Two cases of new variant Omicron detected in UK

Two people in the UK have been found to be infected with the new Covid variant, Omicron, the health secretary has said. Sajid Javid said the cases in Brentwood, Essex, and Nottingham were confirmed by the UK Health Security Agency after genomic sequencing. They are linked and connected to travel in southern Africa, and both cases and their households were self-isolating. The new variant has also been identified in South Africa, Botswana, Belgium, Hong Kong and Israel. Prime Minister Boris Johnson is holding a press conference at Downing Street with the chief scientific adviser to the government, Sir Patrick Vallance, and the UK's chief medical adviser Prof Chris Whitty.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59445388>

Covid Will Keep Spawning Variants Till the World Is Immune

So far, SARS-CoV-2's most devastating impacts have been in developed countries. The U.S., U.K. and European Union have accounted for about a third of deaths, compared to their roughly 10% share of the world's population. However, it's been in the BRICS grouping of fast-growing middle-income nations where an outsized share of new variants of concern have been isolated and analyzed for the first time. From the original strain in China, to the Delta lineage picked up in India, the Gamma variety isolated in Brazil and the Beta and latest Omicron strains from South Africa, only the U.K.-related Alpha variant has emerged outside these countries.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-11-26/covid-will-keep-spawning-variants-like-b-1-1-529-till-the-world-is-immune>

Israel to close borders to all foreigners due to omicron variant

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said in a statement that the country's borders would be closed to all foreigners due to concerns about the omicron variant and that Israeli citizens coming into the country would have to quarantine, regardless of their vaccination status. The statement, issued on Saturday, said that beginning at midnight between Sunday and Monday, the country's borders would be closed to international travelers for two weeks pending approval from the government, Reuters reported. One case of the omicron variant has been confirmed in Israel and seven others in the country are suspected to have the variant, according to the news outlet.

<https://thehill.com/policy/international/583254-israel-closes-borders-to-all-foreigners-due-to-omicron-variant>

Israel Finds Case of New Covid Variant Discovered in South Africa

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said Israel was "on the verge of an emergency situation" after the new Covid-19 variant discovered in southern Africa was detected in a passenger arriving from Malawi. "Our cardinal principle is to act now forcefully and quickly," Bennett said at a meeting with health officials, according to a statement from his office. "We are in a new situation now. This new variant is very worrying." Scientists are still trying to determine whether the new strain, called B.1.1529, is more transmissible or more lethal than previous ones. What's clear is that it has the most mutations of any strain yet identified. That's raised concerns in South Africa and internationally, with authorities fearing a wave of cases that could increase pressure on already strained health-care systems.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/israel-identifies-case-of-covid-19-variant-found-in-south-africa>

New Covid-19 variant raises risk of recovery limbo

A new Covid-19 mutation is threatening to suspend the world in coronavirus limbo. Countries including Britain and Singapore have imposed bans on travellers from South Africa and other nations where a concerning new variant has been detected. A highly infectious strain is a particular problem for economies with low vaccination rates. If it evades vaccines, another round of lockdowns could be on the cards at a time when governments and central banks have depleted firepower.

<https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/new-covid-19-variant-raises-risk-recovery-limbo-2021-11-26/>

WTO postpones major meeting over COVID-19 concerns -sources

The World Trade Organization (WTO) became the first major diplomatic casualty of the new coronavirus variant on Friday when it postponed its first ministerial meeting in four years due to the deteriorating health situation. Ministers from WTO members were due to have gathered next week for a meeting widely seen as a test of the WTO's relevance. The WTO said that its members had agreed late on Friday to postpone the ministerial conference after the new variant outbreak led to travel restrictions that would have prevented many ministers from reaching Geneva.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/wto-postpones-major-meeting-over-covid-19-concerns-sources-2021-11-26/>

U.S. President Biden calls for intellectual property protection waivers on COVID-19 vaccines

U.S. President Joe Biden on Friday called on nations expected to meet at the World Trade Organization next week to agree to waive intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines in the wake of the identification of a new coronavirus variant in South Africa. However, the meeting he was referring to was later postponed after the new variant led to travel restrictions that would have prevented many participants from reaching Geneva

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-president-biden-calls-intellectual-property-protection-waivers-covid-19-2021-11-26/>

New COVID variant Omicron triggers global alarm, market sell-off

The discovery of a new coronavirus variant named Omicron triggered global alarm on Friday as countries rushed to suspend travel from southern Africa and stock markets on both sides of the Atlantic suffered their biggest falls in more than a year. The World Health Organisation (WHO) said Omicron may spread more quickly than other forms, and preliminary evidence suggested there is an increased risk of reinfection. Epidemiologists warned travel curbs may be too late to stop Omicron from circulating globally. The new mutations were first discovered in South Africa and have since been detected in Belgium, Botswana, Israel and Hong Kong.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/japan-tighten-border-controls-s-africa-others-new-virus-variant-jiji-2021-11-26/>

Hong Kong finds two cases of new Covid variant identified in Africa

Two cases of the new Covid-19 strain raising alarm in parts of southern Africa have been found in travelers arriving in Hong Kong. A traveler from South Africa was found to have the variant—currently known as B.1.1.529—while the other case was identified in a person quarantined in the hotel room opposite them, the Hong Kong government said late Thursday. That person may have been infected as air flowed between the rooms, according to the government. B.1.1.529 carries an unusually large number of mutations and is “clearly very different” from previous incarnations, Tulio de Oliveira, a bio-informatics professor who runs gene-sequencing institutions at two South African universities, said at a briefing on Thursday.

<https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/11/26/hong-kong-finds-two-cases-of-new-covid-variant-identified-in-africa/>

WHO Says New Strain Is a Variant of Concern, Names It Omicron

The World Health Organization said that a strain of coronavirus recently discovered by South African researchers is a variant of concern, posing a threat that could confound countries’ efforts to slow the spread of Covid-19. The WHO assigned the Greek letter omicron to the variant, which had been known as B.1.1.529, following a meeting by a panel of experts Friday. Scientists say the variant carries a high number of mutations in its spike protein, which plays a key role in the virus’s entry into cells in the body. It’s also what is targeted by vaccines, so if the protein changes enough, it raises concern that the mutations could make immunizations less effective.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/who-says-newly-identified-covid-strain-is-variant-of-concern?srnd=premium-europe>

Dozens of COVID-19 cases on flight from South Africa, Dutch authorities say

Dutch health authorities said that dozens of people who arrived in Amsterdam on two flights from South Africa on Friday are likely infected with COVID-19, and they are conducting further testing to see if people are infected with the recently discovered Omicron coronavirus variant. Around 600 passengers arrived at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on the two KLM flights on Friday and then faced hours of delays and testing due to concerns over the new virus variant. On the basis of initial testing, the Dutch health ministry estimated there may be around 85 positive cases among the passengers.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/passengers-south-africa-face-wait-covid-19-testing-amsterdam-2021-11-26/>

Chris Whitty: I worry people won't accept more Covid curbs

England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty has said his "greatest worry" is whether people will accept fresh curbs on activities to tackle Covid variants. His comments came after the government announced quarantines on travellers from some African countries following the emergence of a new strain. Prof Whitty said he questioned whether "we could take people with us" if restrictions had to be imposed. England has been through three national lockdowns since Covid first struck. There have also been many local restrictions imposed at various points during the past 20 months.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59434196>

New Covid variant: World could be dealing with a 'totally new pandemic,' WHO envoy David Nabarro says

The new super-variant could pose such a risk to vaccines that the world could be dealing with a "totally new pandemic", a covid expert has said. David Nabarro, special envoy on Covid-19 for the World Health Organisation, said the variant B.1.1.529 that has been found in South Africa has been provisionally labelled with the Greek letter Nu. He said the variant posed a serious threat because the extent of its 32 mutations suggested it had a greater capacity to evade immunity from vaccines.

<https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/new-covid-super-variant-south-africa-new-pandemic-who-envoy-1320998?ITO=newsnow>

Exit Strategies

Saudi Arabia to loosen travel restrictions following discovery of omicron variant | TheHill

Saudi Arabia announced Saturday that it will loosen its pandemic travel restrictions a day after putting a pause on incoming flights from seven African nations in response to the detection of a new coronavirus variant. Saudi Arabia's interior ministry said international travelers from all countries will be allowed into the country as long as they have one dose of the coronavirus vaccine, Reuters reported. Travelers will still have to quarantine for three days, however. The easing of the restrictions will go into effect next Saturday. A number of other countries, including the U.S., also added travel restrictions on Friday for countries in southern Africa due to the new variant. The United Kingdom announced further restrictions on Saturday after detecting two cases of the variant within its borders. The omicron variant was first detected in South Africa and has spread to several other countries, including Italy, Germany and Israel.

<https://thehill.com/policy/international/middle-east-north-africa/583248-saudi-arabia-to-loosen-pandemic-travel>

BioNTech says it could tweak Covid vaccine in 100 days if needed

BioNTech says it could produce and ship an updated version of its vaccine within 100 days if the new Covid variant detected in southern Africa is found to evade existing immunity. The German biotechnology company is already investigating whether the vaccine it developed with US drugmaker Pfizer works well against the variant, named Omicron, which has caused concern due to its high number of mutations and initial suggestions that it could be transmitting more quickly. The company says it will know in two weeks whether its current vaccine is likely to be sufficiently effective against the B.1.1.529 variant, now named Omicron by the World Health Organization, based on lab-based experiments.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/nov/26/biontech-says-it-could-tweak-covid-vaccine-in-100-days-if-needed>

Australia starts 14-day quarantine for citizens travelling from southern Africa

Australia will introduce 14-day quarantine for citizens and their dependents travelling from nine countries in southern Africa due to the new coronavirus variant, its health minister said on Saturday. "Anyone who is not a citizen of Australia or their dependents, and who has been in African countries where the Omicron variant has been detected and spread within the past 14 days will not be able to enter Australia," Health Minister Greg Hunt told a press briefing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-starts-14-day-quarantine-citizens-travelling-southern-africa-2021>

UK Covid Booster Policy Works to Avoid New Wave Despite High Death Rate

The U.K.'s success at avoiding the latest virus emergency ripping across the European continent has come at a price. Thanks to an aggressive booster campaign for older and vulnerable people, the country has managed to keep hospitalization and death rates relatively steady without imposing fresh restrictions. Meanwhile, lockdowns are being reimposed elsewhere in a bid to damp down another Covid wildfire. However, more U.K. residents have died of Covid per capita than in most other western European countries, despite earlier access to vaccines than in the European Union. "The U.K. has been 'running hot'," said Devi Sridhar, a professor of global public health at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. "We act like Europe is so much worse, but we've just accepted a higher death toll and higher infection rates for longer."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-25/u-k-paid-a-deadly-price-to-avoid-europe-s-latest-covid-crisis>

India's COVID vaccine exports resume - but others must step up to vaccinate the world

The Indian embassy in Iran recently celebrated the arrival of 1 million doses of Covaxin, a COVID vaccine developed in India by the pharmaceutical company Bharat Biotech. Bangladesh, Myanmar and Iran also recently received a million doses each of Covishield, the version of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India, the world's single largest vaccine producer. These 4 million doses, delivered in early October 2021, were the first to be exported from India in more than six months. Dubbed the "pharmacy of the world", India has the largest vaccine-production capacity of any country. It therefore has a massive role to play in vaccinating the world. However, up until recently the "pharmacy" has been closed to other countries. Unlike most COVID vaccine producers, India began exporting doses through its "vaccine friendship" initiative - a diplomatic programme based around gifting vaccines to lower-income countries - the same week it began its domestic vaccination programme, back in January 2021. It was soon internationally hailed as a "vaccine superpower". However, in late March exports ground to a halt, as India's devastating second wave took hold and all resources were diverted towards its domestic vaccine programme.

<https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/india-covid-vaccine-exports-resume-125408491.html>

Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 Vaccine Recipients Often Shift to Other Boosters

Johnson & Johnson's Covid-19 vaccine hasn't been the booster shot of choice. Most people originally vaccinated with J&J's shot are choosing other vaccines if they get a booster, new government data show, partly reflecting concerns about the lower effectiveness of the drugmaker's vaccine. So far, about 1.7 million people of the 15.7 million who originally got J&J's single-dose vaccine have received a booster. Of these, 26% stayed with J&J for their second dose through Wednesday, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The rest of those originally immunized with J&J's shot and later got boosters received other drugmakers' vaccines. Some 43% got the Moderna Inc. mRNA vaccine, the CDC said, while 31% received a booster from Pfizer Inc. and partner BioNTech

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/johnson-johnson-covid-19-vaccine-recipients-often-shift-to-other-boosters-11637931600>

Canada Restricts Travel From Southern Africa on New Variant

Canada is following countries, from the U.S. to Hong Kong, in banning foreign nationals from seven southern African nations, amid concerns about a new Covid-19 variant. Worries about the variant sent markets around the world tumbling Friday, feeding fears the latest threat could derail the fragile global recovery. There are no direct flights from the region into Canada. We are "acting quickly to protect the health and safety of Canadians," Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos told reporters in Ottawa. "We are banning the entry of foreign nationals into Canada that have traveled through southern Africa in the last 14 days."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/canada-restricts-travel-from-southern-africa-on-covid-variant>

World races to contain new COVID threat, the omicron variant

Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the world raced Friday to contain a new coronavirus variant potentially more dangerous than the one that has fueled relentless waves of infection on nearly every continent. A World Health Organization panel named the variant "omicron" and classified it as a highly transmissible virus of concern, the same category that includes the predominant delta variant, which is still a scourge driving higher cases of sickness and death in Europe and parts of the United States. "It seems to spread rapidly," U.S. President Joe Biden said of the new variant, only a day after celebrating the resumption of Thanksgiving gatherings for millions of American families and the sense that normal life was coming back at least for the vaccinated. In announcing new travel restrictions, he told reporters, "I've decided that we're going to be cautious."

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-new-variant-southern-africa-33fa0983af6c9f961a186f4f4bb1147d>

New Covid variant: South Africa's pride and punishment

South Africans have responded sharply to the news that the UK, and a growing list of other countries, have reacted to the emergence of a new Covid variant with red-listings and travel bans. While there is genuine pride here in the country's scientific expertise, and the speed with which South Africa has been able to identify and share information about new variants, there is also a strong sense that the nation is being unfairly punished for its successes. "The world should provide support to South Africa and Africa and not discriminate or isolate it," said Prof Tulio de Oliveira, the Durban-based scientist leading efforts to understand the new variant.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59432579>

WTO Postpones Geneva Ministerial Meeting Over Virus Concerns

The World Trade Organization postponed its in-person ministerial conference in Geneva as Switzerland tightened travel restrictions following the discovery of a new strain of the coronavirus, people familiar with the situation said.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/wto-postpones-geneva-ministerial-meeting-over-virus-concerns/ar-AARb7CS>

B.1.1.529 Omicron: How Covid19 Virus Variant Is Already Disrupting Global Travel

Fallout from the new, potentially riskier Covid-19 variant detected in southern Africa is adding fresh frustrations for travelers, just as they were glimpsing a return to normalcy. The U.S., European Union members, Canada and Hong Kong are all restricting travel from several nations in southern Africa. The U.K. halted flights, placed six African countries on its travel "red list" and will require arriving travelers to quarantine in hotels in an attempt to quash the spread of the B.1.1.529 variant — to which the World Health Organization has assigned the Greek letter omicron.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/b-1-1-529-omicron-how-covid19-virus-variant-is-already-disrupting-global-travel>

Ski holidays thrown into doubt as France mandates vaccine passport for lifts

France has mandated the use of vaccine passports in ski lifts, throwing the winter travel plans of thousands of British families into doubt. Anyone over the age of 12 will need a pass to show they are fully vaccinated, or have had one dose and recovered from Covid-19 in the last 180 days from December 4. But Thursday's announcement will cause misery for Brits with teenagers - as the NHS app with a Covid pass is only available to the over-16s, the Times reports.

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/ski-lifts-vaccine-passport-france-holidays-plans-b968432.html>

Bennett: 'Super COVID variant' of top concern, travel abroad discouraged

The government voted to ban all foreigners from entering Israel as part of an effort to stem the spread of the new South African "Omicron" variant, one case of which has been confirmed in the country and seven others which are under investigation. The coronavirus cabinet met for nearly

three hours on Saturday night agreeing on a series of new restrictions. For the time being, all individuals returning from any country – vaccinated Israelis included – will need to be isolated for three days upon entry into Israel. Travelers would be tested at the airport and then be required to take a PCR test on day three, and only leave isolation once a negative result is obtained.

<https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/south-african-variant-of-concern-discovered-in-israel-687074>

Brazil health regulator calls for Africa travel restrictions, Bolsonaro noncommittal

Brazil will shut its borders to travelers arriving from six southern African countries, the chief of staff to President Jair Bolsonaro said on Friday, the latest in a slew of major nations to announce restrictions meant to combat the newly identified Omicron variant of the coronavirus. "Brazil will close its aerial border to six countries in Africa due to the new coronavirus variant," Chief of Staff Ciro Nogueira wrote in a Twitter post. "We're going to protect Brazilians in this new phase of the pandemic in this country. The official notice will be published tomorrow and will be going into effect on Monday."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazil-health-regulator-calls-africa-travel-restrictions-bolsonaro-dismissive-2021-11-26/>

U.S. to restrict travel from 8 African nations after Covid variant detected

The U.S. will restrict travel from eight African nations starting on November 29. The ban comes amid the discovery of a Covid-19 variant "Omicron" detected in South Africa. The World Health Organization confirmed the variant is highly transmissible.

<https://www.msnbc.com/katy-tur/watch/u-s-to-restrict-travel-from-8-african-nations-after-covid-variant-detected-127255621546>

European nations lead off in shutting borders to African nations with cases of new Omicron COVID variant

All 27 European Union member states and the United Kingdom have temporarily suspended travel to southern Africa following the discovery of a new COVID variant. The World Health Organization (WHO) on Friday classified the B.1.1.529 variant, now designated as Omicron, as a SARS-CoV-2 "variant of concern", saying it may spread more quickly than other forms. Infections in South Africa had risen steeply in recent weeks, coinciding with the detection of the variant. After a closed meeting of independent experts who reviewed the data, WHO realised a statement saying there had been a "detrimental change in COVID-19 epidemiology".

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-27/countries-impose-travel-restrictions-on-southern-africa/100655630>

Military sent to Michigan to deal with surge in COVID as Minnesota calls up the National Guard

Michigan is currently the hardest-hit state in the nation, with COVID-19 cases rising 88 per cent in the last 14 days. The governor, Gretchen Whitmer, has requested federal assistance to help in hospitals, and 44 people are being deployed. In Minnesota, another state struggling with a surge in cases, the National Guard is being brought in to take some of the strain off nursing home staff. Nursing homes in the state are now suffering a chronic staffing shortage with 23,000 open long-term caregiver positions as employees seek better paid, less intense jobs or else quit due to vaccine mandates. Governor Tim Walz has deployed 400 members of the National Guard to work as nurses and proposed using \$50 million in unspent federal coronavirus relief funding to help these facilities hire and retain staff

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10244209/Military-sent-Michigan-deal-surge-COVID-Minnesota-calls-National-Guard.html>

Former Covid-Zero Haven Ditches Masks, QR Codes in Stark Pivot

The biggest state in Australia is eliminating a raft of pandemic restrictions as it nears a 95% vaccination rate, in one of the starkest reversals from the Covid-Zero strategy yet. From Dec. 15, or

once the 95% inoculation target is hit, masks will only be required on public transport, on planes and at airports in New South Wales, ending the need to wear a protective face covering in most indoor settings. Check-ins via QR code, which are currently mandatory in the state at any venue, will only be needed at hospitals, aged-care facilities, pubs, small bars and nightclubs, according to the latest guidelines from the New South Wales government.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/former-covid-zero-haven-ditches-masks-qr-codes-in-stark-pivot>

Partisan Exits

Covid: South Africa 'punished' for detecting new Omicron variant

South Africa has complained it is being punished - instead of applauded - for discovering Omicron, a concerning new variant of Covid-19. The foreign ministry made the statement as countries around the world restricted travel from southern Africa as details of the spread emerged. Early evidence suggests Omicron has a higher re-infection risk. The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Friday that the new variant was "of concern". Several cases have now been identified in Europe - two in the UK, two in Germany, one in Belgium and another one in Italy, while a suspected case was found in the Czech Republic. The new variant has also been detected in Botswana, Hong Kong and Israel. Hundreds of passengers arriving in the Netherlands from South Africa are being tested for the new variant.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-59442129>

U.S. President Biden says not considering new vaccine mandates

U.S. President Joe Biden said on Friday his administration was not considering new vaccine mandates following the discovery of a new COVID-19 variant in South Africa, which led to travel bans from that country and seven other nations. "We don't know a lot about the variant except that is of great concern," Biden told reporters. "I decided that we are going to be cautious."

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-president-biden-says-not-considering-new-vaccine-mandates-2021-11-26/>

Scientific Viewpoint

Botswana says 15 more cases of Omicron variant detected in country

Botswana's health minister Edwin Dikoloti said on Sunday the country had detected 15 more cases of the Omicron coronavirus variant, adding to the four confirmed cases it declared on Friday. The minister applauded its scientists for detecting the new variant in the country early, but stressed it did not emerge in Botswana as the four cases were found in people who travelled to the country on a diplomatic mission. He declined to comment on the nationalities of the four people saying the country "would not want to add to the seeming trend where the variant is stigmatised".

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/botswana-says-15-more-cases-omicron-variant-detected-country-2021-11-28/>

S.African doctor says patients with Omicron variant have "very mild" symptoms

A South African doctor who was one of the first to suspect a different coronavirus strain among patients said on Sunday that symptoms of the Omicron variant were so far mild and could be treated at home. Dr. Angelique Coetzee, a private practitioner and chair of South African Medical Association, told Reuters that on Nov. 18 she noticed seven patients at her clinic who had symptoms different from the dominant Delta variant, albeit "very mild".

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safrican-doctor-says-patients-with-omicron-variant-have-very-mild-symptoms-2021-11-28/>

Omicron coronavirus variant travel bans may be too late, experts say

The Biden administration is focusing on booster shots as a key weapon in efforts to protect the nation against a potentially dangerous coronavirus variant even as the extent of the threat remains

unclear, according to three senior administration officials familiar with the plans. A group of senior health officials had a call with South African scientists Sunday to understand the latest about the new variant and to help inform next steps, according to one of the senior administration officials, who, like the other two, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal discussions.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/28/omicron-variant-coronavirus/>

New Coronavirus Variant a ‘Serious Concern’ in South Africa

Scientists in South Africa are studying a recently identified new coronavirus variant of concern, stoking fears the country may face a potentially severe fourth wave that could spread internationally. The new discovery, called B.1.1.529 until a Greek letter is assigned to it by the World Health Organization, carries an unusually large number of mutations and is “clearly very different” from previous incarnations, Tulio de Oliveira, a bio-informatics professor who runs gene-sequencing institutions at two South African universities, said at a briefing on Thursday.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/new-coronavirus-variant-a-e2-80-98serious-concern-e2-80-99-in-south-africa/ar-AAR7yUH>

Merck’s Covid-19 Pill Was 30% Effective in Final Analysis, Company Says

Merck and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics said a final analysis of their experimental Covid-19 pill found the drug less effective than an early look, prompting U.S. health regulators to continue a staff review of the drug’s application days before an outside panel meets. The Food and Drug Administration made public Friday their initial review of the drug’s application, including an analysis of clinical-trial data for the drug, molnupiravir. Agency staff said the drug was effective at reducing the risk of hospitalization and death, but they didn’t take a position on whether the agency should authorize the drug. The agency also said no major safety concerns turned up in late-stage testing. The FDA said it is still conducting its review of molnupiravir, after the companies told the agency earlier this week the pill was 30% effective in a final analysis of the late-stage study results. After taking an early look at results, the companies had reported in October that molnupiravir was 50% effective.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/fda-to-disclose-staff-review-of-merck-covid-19-pill-11637922600>

Omicron Coronavirus Variant Raises Questions Among Scientists

The fast-spreading Omicron coronavirus variant recently identified in South Africa has virologists and health authorities on edge because of its many mutations, but much about its infectiousness and virulence remains unknown. Scientists said some of the roughly 50 mutations on the new variant, called B.1.1.529, could potentially render it more transmissible or reduce vaccine effectiveness. But it will take time for virologists and infectious-disease researchers to study the variant’s spread and the potential impact on vaccines and therapeutics. “There are several aspects of concern here, but there are lots of unknowns,” Sharon Peacock, director of the Covid-19 Genetics U.K. Consortium, said at a press briefing on Friday. “It’s so important to stress how much we don’t know at the moment about this new variant.”

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-coronavirus-variant-raises-questions-among-scientists-11637954249>

Omicron Identified as Covid-19 ‘Variant of Concern,’ Triggering Global Fears

A fast-spreading new strain of the coronavirus first detected in southern Africa is a global “variant of concern” and might pose a higher risk of people falling ill with Covid-19 for a second time, the World Health Organization said Friday, as governments around the globe restricted travel from the region. WHO said there was also preliminary evidence that the variant, which it named Omicron after the Greek letter, was more transmissible than the Delta variant that is currently dominant world-wide, and other virus strains. Health authorities in Belgium, Israel, Hong Kong and Botswana said they had detected first cases of the variant. Although scientists were still figuring out the exact effects of the variant’s many mutations, its discovery highlights the continued threat posed by an evolving virus to the world’s emergence from the pandemic. The travel restrictions imposed by many countries,

including the U.S., raised fears that there could be further setbacks to the reopening of economic and social life, including in Western countries with high vaccination rates.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/southern-africas-new-covid-19-variant-prompts-wave-of-travel-restrictions-11637920491>

Belgium Confirms Case of New Virus Strain in Unvaccinated Traveler

Belgium said it has confirmed one case of a concerning new Covid-19 variant in someone who traveled from abroad. Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke told reporters the variant was detected in an unvaccinated person who first tested positive for Covid-19 on Nov. 22. The new strain prompted the European Union on Friday to recommend suspending air travel from the region. Belgium also Friday ordered a new set of steps to combat the spiraling growth of Covid-19 cases, including a closure of nightclubs for three weeks and restricting privately organized parties.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/belgium-confirms-case-of-new-virus-strain-in-person-from-abroad>

Scientists Racing to Decode Omicron as Defenses Buy Time

Travel bans and other snap defenses that countries threw up against omicron, the new Covid-19 variant, are buying time for scientists to answer key questions that could prevent another wave of deaths.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/finance/other/scientists-race-to-decode-omicron-as-variant-threatens-the-world/ar-AARaXwF>

BioNTech Expects Data on Vaccine Versus New Variant in Two Weeks

BioNTech SE has begun studying the new Covid-19 variant that has emerged in southern Africa and expects the first data from laboratory tests about how it interacts with its vaccine within two weeks. The lab data will shed light on whether the new variant, called B.1.1.529, can elude the vaccine it makes together with Pfizer Inc., the German biotech said on Friday. Pfizer and BioNTech put plans in place months ago to be able to ship a new version of their shot within 100 days if necessary, a BioNTech spokeswoman said. "We understand the concern of experts and have immediately initiated investigations," BioNTech said in a statement.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/biontech-expects-data-on-vaccine-versus-new-variant-in-two-weeks>

Covid-19 Variant: Scientists Race to Decode Omicron as Strain Threatens World

Travel bans and other snap defenses that countries threw up against omicron, the new Covid-19 variant, are buying time for scientists to answer key questions that could prevent another wave of deaths. Labs in Europe, the U.S. and Africa are preparing for tests to see how the new variant is likely to behave in people who've been vaccinated or previously infected. Real-world research will be important too, as health authorities monitor the outbreak in South Africa closely to find out how much more transmissible the new variant will be as it spreads and whether it's more dangerous or deadly.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/scientists-race-to-decode-omicron-as-emergency-defenses-buy-time>

Paris makes mask wearing outdoors mandatory at public gatherings

Paris has made the wearing of face masks outside mandatory again at public gatherings as the COVID-19 infection rate in the French capital soars, police said. The police prefecture said in a statement that masks will have to be worn for gathering in public spaces, at festivals and spectacles, on markets and when standing in line.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/paris-makes-mask-wearing-outdoors-mandatory-public-gatherings-2021-11-26/>

61 travellers from South Africa in Netherlands positive for COVID-19 -authorities

Dutch health authorities said that 61 people who arrived in Amsterdam on two flights from South Africa on Friday tested positive for COVID-19, and they were conducting further testing early Saturday to see if any of the infections are with the recently discovered Omicron coronavirus variant. Around 600 passengers arrived at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on the two KLM flights on Friday and then faced hours of delays and testing due to concerns over the new virus variant.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/passengers-south-africa-face-wait-covid-19-testing-amsterdam-2021-11-26/>

Merck's COVID-19 pill significantly less effective in new analysis

Merck & Co said on Friday updated data from its study of its experimental COVID-19 pill showed the drug was significantly less effective in cutting hospitalizations and deaths than previously reported. The drugmaker said its pill showed a 30% reduction in hospitalizations and deaths, based on data from 1,433 patients. In October, its data showed a roughly 50% efficacy, based on data from 775 patients. The drug, molnupiravir, was developed with partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/merck-says-covid-19-pill-cuts-hospitalization-death-risk-by-30-2021-11-26/>

Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna expect data on shot's protection against new COVID-19 variant soon

BioNTech SE said on Friday it expects more data on a worrying new coronavirus variant detected in South Africa within two weeks to help determine whether its vaccine produced with partner Pfizer Inc would have to be reworked. Pfizer and BioNTech said that if necessary they expect to be able to ship a new vaccine tailored to the emerging variant in approximately 100 days. "We understand the concern of experts and have immediately initiated investigations on variant B.1.1.529," BioNTech said in a statement when asked to comment. "We expect more data from the laboratory tests in two weeks at the latest. These data will provide more information about whether B.1.1.529 could be an escape variant that may require an adjustment of our vaccine if the variant spreads globally," it added.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/biontech-says-expect-more-data-new-variant-2-weeks-2021-11-26/>

Israel warns of looming emergency after its first case of omicron, new COVID-19 variant

Israel Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said on Friday that the country is "on the threshold of an emergency situation" after it detected its first case of omicron, the new South African strain of coronavirus. The Israeli Health Ministry said it detected the new strain in a traveler who had returned from Malawi, and that it is investigating two other suspected cases, The Associated Press reported. Bennett said the new variant is more contagious and spreads more rapidly than the delta variant. He added that authorities are still gathering data on how effective the coronavirus vaccines will be against the variant.

<https://thehill.com/policy/international/middle-east-north-africa/583201-israel-warns-of-looming-emergency-after-its>

COVID-19: New variant officially named Omicron and Health Secretary Sajid Javid warns of 'huge international concern' as first case found in Europe

A worrying new COVID strain has been classified by the World Health Organisation as a "variant of concern" - its most serious level - and officially given the Greek name Omicron. The WHO said the variant, first detected in South Africa and previously known as B.1.1.529, "has a large number of mutations, some of which are concerning" and early evidence suggested an increased risk of reinfection compared to other strains. "This variant has been detected at faster rates than previous surges in infection, suggesting that this variant may have a growth advantage," the organisation added.

<https://news.sky.com/story/no-cases-of-new-variant-in-uk-but-highly-likely-it-has-spread-to-other-countries-javid-says->

[12479219](#)

Moderna Edges Pfizer in Study of Five Covid Vaccines

The Moderna Inc. and Russian Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccines both edged the version from Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE in effectiveness in a large-scale study of five different immunization shots conducted by Hungarian researchers. Moderna's vaccine was 88.7% effective in protecting against coronavirus infection and 93.6% effective against Covid-related mortality, compared with 85.7% and 95.4%, respectively for Sputnik, according to the paper published Wednesday on the website of the Clinical Microbiology and Infection medical journal. Pfizer came in third with 83.3% and 90.6%, respectively. The research reviewed the effectiveness of five vaccines in people at least seven days after they received their second dose. Data from more than 3.7 million vaccinated people aged 16 and over were reviewed from January to June of this year.

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-25/moderna-edges-pfizer-in-hungarian-study-of-five-covid-vaccine-s?utm_source=google&utm_medium=bd&cmplid=google

Coronavirus Resurgence

CDC says no cases of Omicron identified in U.S. so far

No cases of new COVID-19 variant detected in South Africa have been identified in the United States to date, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Friday. The World Health Organization (WHO) designated the B.1.1.529 variant, dubbed Omicron, as being "of concern," the fifth variant to be classified as such. "We expect Omicron to be identified quickly, if it emerges in the U.S.," CDC said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/cdc-says-no-cases-omicron-identified-us-so-far-2021-11-27/>

Australia investigates new COVID-19 variant found in South Africa

Australia on Friday said it was investigating the newly identified COVID-19 variant spreading in South Africa and warned it may close its borders to travellers from the African nation if risks from the new strain rise. South African scientists are concerned the new variant could evade the body's immune response and make it more transmissible as it has a "very unusual constellation" of mutations. Australia Health Minister Greg Hunt said he would swiftly respond if the World Health Organization (WHO) classifies it as a major new variant.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/australia-investigates-new-covid-19-variant-found-south-africa-2021-11-26/>

New Zealand PM Ardern says prepared for new COVID-19 variants

New Zealand is well prepared for the discovery of new coronavirus variants that may be resistant to vaccines, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Friday, including the strain currently spreading in South Africa. "All of our planning around COVID, we have built into it the possibility of variants in the future," Ardern said in an interview for the upcoming Reuters Next conference. "That is why we are maintaining levels of public health protections. It's why we've maintained requirements at our border." Britain on Thursday drew attention to a newly identified coronavirus variant in South Africa with a spike protein that was dramatically different to the one in the original coronavirus that COVID-19 vaccines are based on.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/new-zealand-pm-ardern-says-prepared-new-covid-19-variants-2021-11-26/>

South Africa Raises Alarm Over New Coronavirus Variant

South Africa's government is considering new public-health restrictions to contain a fast-spreading new variant of the coronavirus that scientists say has a high number of mutations that may make it more transmissible and allow it to evade some of the immune responses triggered by previous

infection or vaccination. The warning from the South African scientists and the Health Ministry, issued in a hastily called news briefing Thursday, prompted the World Health Organization to call a meeting of experts for Friday to discuss whether to declare the new strain a “variant of concern.” The WHO uses this label for virus strains that have been proven to be more contagious, lead to more serious illness or decrease the effectiveness of public-health measures, tests, treatments or vaccines. Other variants of concern include the Delta variant that is now dominant world-wide and the Alpha variant that drove a deadly wave of infections across Europe and the U.S. last winter and spring.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-africa-raises-alarm-over-new-coronavirus-variant-11637862061>

Shanghai's Flareup Spreads as China Faces a New Covid Outbreak

Shanghai scrapped about one-third of the flights from its busiest international airport on Friday and suspended some hospital services after a handful of Covid infections were detected in the financial hub, showing China's commitment to stringent curbs to eliminate the virus as winter looms. More than 30% of flights from Shanghai Pudong International Airport were canceled on Friday morning, state broadcaster CCTV reported. Schools were immediately suspended and housing complexes tied to the cases were locked down as local officials embraced strict measures in what may become a protracted battle as cold weather forces more people indoors. Chinese airline stocks declined. Shanghai International Airport Co. Ltd. fell as much as 4%, while Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd. and China Eastern Airlines Corp. Ltd. dropped at least 2% in Hong Kong.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/shanghai-s-flareup-spreads-as-china-faces-a-new-covid-outbreak>

Hong Kong Finds 2 Cases of New Covid Variant Identified in Africa

Two cases of the new Covid-19 strain raising alarm in parts of southern Africa and unnerving financial markets worldwide have been found in travelers in compulsory quarantine in Hong Kong. A traveler from South Africa was found to have the variant -- currently known as B.1.1.529 -- while the other case was identified in a person who'd traveled from Canada and was quarantined in the hotel room opposite his, the Hong Kong government said late Thursday. The traveler from South Africa used a mask with a valve that doesn't filter exhaled air and may have transmitted the virus to his neighbor when the hotel room door was open, a health department spokesperson said Friday.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/hong-kong-finds-two-cases-of-new-covid-variant-in-travelers>

New Lockdown

Portugal Says Remote Working Will Be Mandatory on Jan. 2-9

The Portuguese government said remote working will be mandatory in the week of Jan. 2-9 as it tries to prevent a spike in coronavirus infections after the Christmas and New Year holiday break. Schools will reopen on Jan. 10, a week later than previously planned, Prime Minister Antonio Costa said on Thursday at a press conference in Lisbon. Until that first week of January, remote working will be recommended when possible. From December, the use of masks will become mandatory in closed spaces, digital certificates will be needed to access restaurants or hotels, and negative tests will be required for nightclubs, bars and sports venues. Masks are currently already required on public transport.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-25/portugal-says-remote-working-to-be-mandatory-in-week-of-jan-2-9>