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Letter to the Editor

Path to normal life post-COVID-19, the Saudi Arabian case



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Dear Editor,

Up to date, there have been up to 494,587,638 confirmed cases and 6,170,283 deaths of COVID-19 worldwide with the eastern Mediterranean region encompassing only 4.4 % of the cases [1]. The SARS-COV-2 virus is still causing a worldwide pandemic that does not seem to end by the near future. Several variants with selective advantages including increased transmissibility and immunity escape have emerged. This emergence could be partially attributed on one hand to the continuous transmission of the virus due to the insufficient preventative and restrictive measures adopted by several countries, in addition to the partial adherence of the general community [2]. On the other hand, the likelihood of new mutations can increase in patients with impaired immune system due to prolonged SARS-COV-2 infection [3]. We present here in, an update on the current epidemiological situation of COVID-19 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in view of the worldwide emergence of the third wave of COVID-19. In the Kingdom, the surge in the number of new daily cases started in mid-December where the number of cases increased from 80 in 16 December 2021 to 252 in 21 December 2021, reaching 1024 by January first 2022. The surge was in conjunction with the opening of the MDLBeast Soundstorm music festival held in Riyadh during the same period; where more than 500,000 persons have attended with mask usage not being enforced during the event. As seen in Fig. 1, in 18 January, 5928 new COVID-19 cases were reported throughout the country. Consequently, by the end of this month, the Saudi ministry of health announced the possibility to book an appointment through “Sehaty” and “Tawakkalna” apps to take the booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine; this is after having taken the second dose of at least three months [4]. Furthermore, the ministry of interior stated that starting from February 1, 2022, all citizens and residents in the kingdom should take the third vaccine dose to secure their “immune” status on the Tawakkalna app. This status will be mandatory to enter any social, scientific, economic or sporting

events in public as well as private places [4]. In all health care centers “hospitals and clinical research centers”, the receipt of the third dose was without the need of prior appointment and was available to all workers including nurses, medical doctors, researchers and even volunteers in the clinical research area. By April 5, 2022, 26,283,466 of first dose, 24,602,529 second dose and 12,387,363 booster doses were administered in KSA [5]. On the other hand, during this same period, social distancing, wearing of masks were still mandatory in public and private spaces. Taking a “Umrah” was still through the “Eatamarna” app; this is in order to ensure that the correct capacity approved by concerned authorities is fulfilled to fight COVID-19 over the territory. All these restrictive/preventative measures led to the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in KSA in March 2022. In the 6th of March, authorities decided to: suspend social distancing in public, private spaces, schools, mosques. wearing masks is no longer mandatory in open areas but only in closed spaces, passengers arriving to KSA are no longer required to abide by the institutional/home quarantine nor required to provide PCR tests upon arrival. Furthermore, social distancing in the Prophet’s holy Mosque and Grand Holy Mosque is no longer applicable; this is while continuing to abide by the wearing of masks inside [6]. By the time of writing this paper, the number of SARS-COV-2 daily cases was still below 100 and the number of deaths arrived to “0” cases in the 4th of April 2022 [5].

Beside the restrictive and preventative measures taken during the pandemic, KSA had put an effort at the level of clinical research and especially the usage of whole genome sequencing techniques [7,8]. Until 7 April 2022, 1247 sequences were shared on the GISAID database, of which 1192 were deposited with complete collection date [9]. At the national level, “Urgent COVID-19 Research Program” was launched; this program aims to explore COVID-19 epidemiology, source of infection, diagnosis, pathological changes, treatments and preventative measures. Through the central institutional review

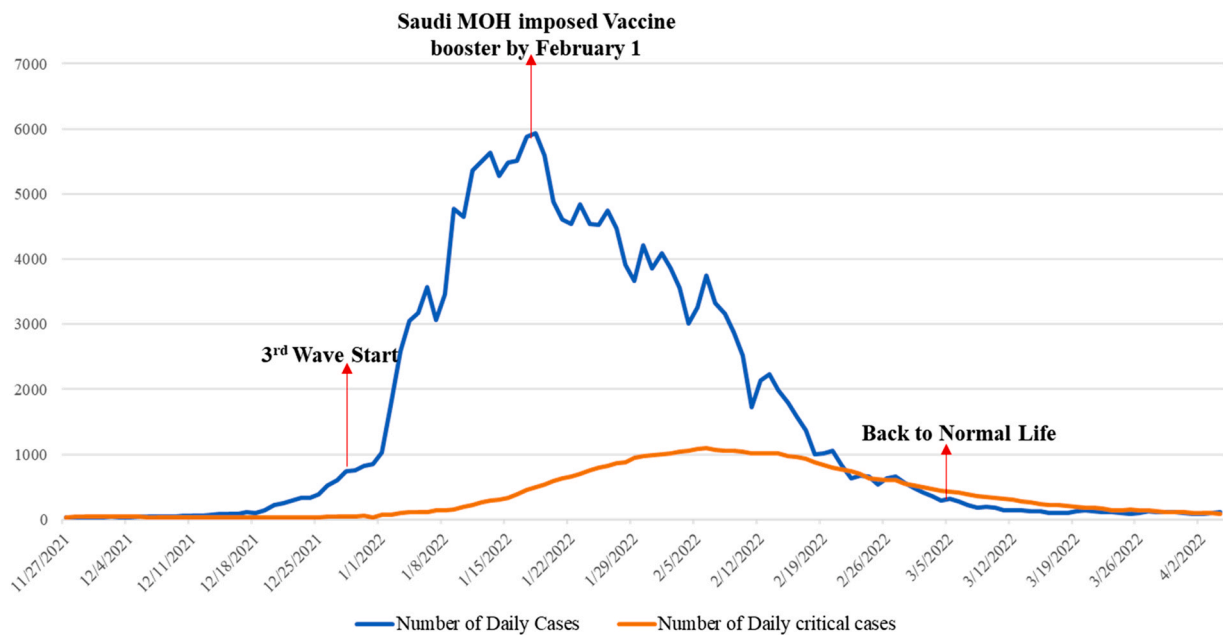


Fig. 1. Number of reported daily cases and daily critical cases from late November 2021 to April 2022 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

board, 338 research proposals were reviewed and more than 100 were given ethical approvals to conduct COVID-19 related research. Furthermore, in cooperation with the ministry of health, Saudi health council and Saudi center for disease control and prevention (SCDC), King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) dedicated a fast track in order to support COVID-19 scientific research [10]. All these attempts and cooperation between different bodies at the kingdom level will undoubtedly provoke the continuous monitoring of SARS-CoV-2, preventing thus the possibility of a new wave of infections.

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Competing interests

None declared.

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