



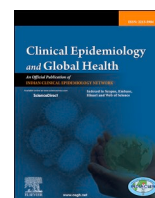
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Letter to the editor

The new COVID-19 omicron variant: Africa must watch its spread!



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The world is experiencing the surge of a new corona virus disease 2019 variant (COVID-19), known as Omicron. The Omicron variant has 32 mutations in its spike protein. Preliminary evidence suggests that there is an increased risk of re-infection, compared to other variants of concern. On November 24, 2021, South Africa reported the identification of a new severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) variant, B.1.1.529, to the World Health Organization (WHO),¹ and on November 26, 2021, WHO named the variant 'Omicron' and classified it as a variant of concern (VOC).

A virus is classified as a VOC if there is evidence of an increase in transmissibility, more severe disease, significant reduction in neutralisation by antibodies generated during previous infection or vaccination, reduced effectiveness of treatments or vaccines, or failures in diagnostic detection.² The ability of the VOC to pose a significant and imminent risk to public health across regions differentiates it from other variant classifications, such as, variant being monitored, variant of interest, and variant of high consequence.² The differences in the variant classifications are based on the risk the variant pose to public health. A variant being monitored does not pose a significant and imminent risk to public health, while a variant of interest is a variant which evidence indicates that it is the cause of an increased proportion of cases or unique outbreak clusters, and a variant of high consequence is a variant that causes severe clinical disease and increased hospitalisations.²

The new COVID-19 Omicron variant was first detected in specimens from Botswana on November 11, 2021 and from South Africa on November 14, 2021.¹ The WHO stated that the Omicron variant has been detected in 57 countries and this number is expected to continue growing. Early data suggests that the strain is more contagious than the delta variant,³ with mild or no symptoms presented by infected individuals. As the Omicron variant is yet to be fully understood, researchers in South Africa and around the world continue to conduct research in order to have an insight to the variant and share timely data.⁴

On December 1, 2021, the first case attributed to Omicron was reported in the United States in a person who returned from travel to South Africa.¹ The Omicron variant has also been detected in travel-related

cases in several European countries, as well as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, Japan and Nigeria.¹ Based on WHO data, in Africa, the Omicron variant has been detected in four countries, with Ghana and Nigeria becoming the first West African countries, and that, Botswana and South Africa have reported 19 and 172 Omicron variant cases, respectively. Owing to this, there have been reports of an increased number of COVID-19 related hospitalisations and death in South Africa.

Although vaccination has been the most effective strategy towards fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the vaccination rate is still low in Africa due to the huge disparities in access to COVID-19 vaccines between the high and the low income countries. Only five African countries, less than 10% of Africa's 54 nations, are projected to hit the target of fully vaccinating 40% of their people by the end of the year 2021, compared to high-income countries where 70% of them have already vaccinated more than 40% of their people.⁵ Limited access to crucial commodities such as syringes may contribute to the slow rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in Africa.⁵

The rise in number of the Omicron variant cases in Botswana, South Africa and some West African countries including Nigeria and Ghana could spell doom for the African health system, where less than 10% of its population is vaccinated against the COVID-19.⁵ Almost all the African countries are trading with the countries with reported cases of the Omicron variant, especially Nigeria, the most populous country and the economic giant of the continent. This will unequivocally facilitate the spread of the new COVID-19 Omicron variant across Africa, mostly through international trading, further wreaking havoc on its economy and health system, which many of the African countries are struggling to rebuild. Owing to this, Africa must therefore monitor the spread of the new COVID-19 Omicron variant. It is therefore, crucial for Africa to scale up the COVID-19 preventive measures, particularly screening travelers at border entry points. WHO and other relevant international agencies should help support and accelerate the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in Africa while African countries should ensure that their most vulnerable population are vaccinated.

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