

GUEST ESSAY

There Will Be Another Variant. Here's What the World Can Do Now.

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By John Nkengasong

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Each time a new variant of the coronavirus emerges, the world follows a similar pattern. Scientists share the discovery, and panic ensues. Not enough is done between each wave to prevent or prepare for the next one.

Omicron caught much of the world off guard. Not by its existence — that's what viruses do — but by how contagious it was and how quickly it spread. Countries tried to institute policies in real time that should have been in place much earlier, such as making sure to have enough testing supplies.

As we near the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world must finally learn from past mistakes. This starts by recognizing that Alpha, Delta and Omicron are not new threats. They are all still the coronavirus. Rather than thrusting our societies into chaos as each new variant emerges, we need to recognize that the virus hasn't been controlled yet and that nations need better strategies to prepare, detect and respond to future waves. All the knowledge that's been gained on how to respond to a variant as lethal as Delta or as contagious as Omicron can be put to good use.

SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19, will continue to change and produce new variants. This is especially true as long as there are large groups of unvaccinated people around the world whom the virus can easily infect and use as hosts to replicate inside and mutate. Because of this, it's impossible for a single country to end the pandemic alone.

To mitigate the impact of future variants, the world needs to establish and strengthen virus monitoring and surveillance systems that can identify emerging variants quickly so that leaders can respond.

OPINION CONVERSATION

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- **When will Omicron peak?**

An infectious disease modeler predicts what's in store for the month of January and possibly beyond.

- **Will Covid-19 evolve to become milder?**

Dr. Andrew Pekosz explains that while mutations may affect severity, they aren't the only way to blunt the virus's power.

- **If the virus isn't going away, how do we live with it?**

Katherine Eban writes that a clear-eyed view is required to organize long-term against an endemic virus.

- **What can New York tell us about Omicron?**

A doctor who helped craft New York's Covid response offers lessons from that experience.

Here's how it works: Scientists regularly get samples of the virus from people who are infected and sequence those samples. This helps scientists pick up on notable changes in the virus. Spikes in cases in certain areas can also alert scientists to look deeper. When researchers find something notable, they can alert colleagues for further study.

Networks of laboratories worldwide should be equipped to study the properties of any new variant to assess its potential impact on available tests, vaccines' effectiveness and treatments.

Scientists in South Africa and Botswana who are already doing this kind of routine surveillance of the coronavirus were able to rapidly warn their research networks and the rest of the world about Omicron. Going forward, such findings must also trigger an effective collective response. When concerning variants are identified, there needs to be a global agreement on how countries should jointly react to mitigate any health and economic harms. Travel restrictions have not been effective in limiting the spread of any of the variants.

Every country must also ramp up its testing infrastructure for the coronavirus. Rapid tests that can be taken at home must be widely available and accessible to cut down on transmission chains, especially during surges. Having the ability to test at home empowers individuals to know their coronavirus status and avoid spreading the virus if they are infected.

Most important, the global vaccination effort must be scaled up to blunt the continued circulation of the virus. This will not only limit the emergence of future variants but also help lessen the virus's toll on the population by making fewer people sick. Certain groups, such as people who have weakened immune systems from treatment for conditions like cancer or H.I.V./AIDS, need to be made a higher priority for vaccinations and protection. People who have difficulty clearing coronavirus infections not only face potentially more severe illness from the virus. A long-term infection also provides opportunity for the virus to mutate more freely and possibly create a new variant.

During surges, countries need to increase access to the measures that can lower risk of infection, like masks. The right mask, worn properly and consistently in indoor public spaces, can provide some protection against all variants. Now that there are drugs available to treat infections, country leaders and drug companies must ensure that there's plenty of supply and that it is available to everyone. This must include people in developing countries. Drugs like Paxlovid, produced by Pfizer, can be taken orally, which allows people to stay home and out of hospitals. Access to this kind of drug is especially important in countries where vaccination rates are low and people are less protected.

The world got lucky with Omicron. It's unimaginable what would have happened if that highly contagious variant had caused disease as severe as Delta has. We may not be so lucky the next time. The world cannot afford to be so unprepared ever again.

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