

OMICRON VARIANT

Don't panic, vaccinate, say health experts

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HEALTH Minister Dr Joe Phaahla and experts have urged citizens to not panic over the new variant of concern but to vaccinate, as the country is prepared for the new Covid-19 variant.

Following the address by President Cyril Ramaphosa on Sunday, Phaahla and Deputy Minister of Health Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, together with a panel of scientists, convened a media briefing to present and further unpack the address and the state of readiness to respond to the variant of concern (Omicron) by the government yesterday.

Phaahla reiterated the call made by the president that South Africa's best bet in response to the Omicron variant was for more South Africans to get vaccinated.

"This is our best weapon in our hands to make sure that we can fight back these variants and the pandemic as a whole," the minister said.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim said that the country was not caught "with our pants down", as scientists and the health-care sector had expected and prepared for a new variant and a fourth wave of infections.

He added that South African scientists gave the country a fighting chance by providing evidence early about the new variant of concern.

Karim said there was a range of mutations in the Omicron variant that scientists knew well because of overlapping mutations with the Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta variants, but the remaining mutations were largely unknown.

"The area that has created concern and this global overreaction is that we are not sure about whether the current vaccines will protect against this new variant ...

"But based on what we know and how the other variants of concern have reacted to vaccine immunity, we can expect that we will still see high effectiveness for hospitalisation and severe disease," he said.

The professor added that scientists could expect vaccines to hold up well in terms of preventing hospitalisation and severe disease.

"Omicron was first described in Botswana and shortly thereafter in South Africa, and the fact that it was so early in their description and picked up was a scientific success.

"South Africa and the world need to now convert this to a response success," Karim said.

He added that the international closing of borders to southern Africa has almost no benefit because the virus is already in many countries and the existing steps to reduce travel transmission will work.

Dr Michelle Groome from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) said in mid-November the country had the lowest number of cases seen since the pandemic started at less than 300 but the cases rapidly increased.

"Most of this has been driven by the case increase in Gauteng, but we have also seen increases in Limpopo, North West and Mpumalanga," she said.

Groome added that although the initial cases were found in the youth at

tertiary institutions, the virus had now spread into other age groups.

The NICD's Dr Waasila Jassat said the country was starting to see a slight increase in hospital admissions in both the public and private health sector in Tshwane and other Gauteng districts.

"In all the admissions in Gauteng, about 25% have known vaccination status but the vast majority of patients for new admissions and current in-patients are unvaccinated people," Jassat said.

Meanwhile, Gauteng Department of Health acting deputy director-general Freddy Kgongwana said the department had been preparing for the fourth wave and new variants since the end of the third wave.

"When you have a war, you have to make sure that your soldiers are looked after very well, and if there is security of oxygen, PPE, power supply and water supply, that makes the battlefield more aligned to fighting Covid-19," Kgongwana said. | **@Chulu M**