

New virus strain: don't panic, SA

EXPERT: DOCTORS KNOW HOW TO TREAT FOURTH WAVE

»» **We've had variants before, including with immune escape – Prof Abdool Karim.**

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Brian Sokutu

As South Africa reels from the impact of omicron – the latest Covid variant to be reported – the country's top scientists and medical experts have called on citizens not to panic, with a Gauteng general practitioner giving a clinical account of daily dealings with patients.

In anticipation of the country being soon hit by the fourth

wave, private general practitioner (GP) Dr Unben Pillay told a department of health virtual media briefing that in the past 10 days, GPs started seeing "a sharp increase in cases of patients presenting with flu-like symptoms: dry cough, fever, night sweat and general body pains".

"Although this is early days – in keeping with all the other Covid waves that we have seen – general practitioners in private practice have become aware of how to manage patients, having already dealt with three waves.

"Generally, cases that we see in private practice are milder, but as hospitals start filling up, we start seeing a lot of the complications.

"We have also done a lot of upskilling in the past few days, so we are aware of what needs to be done in terms of management and treat-

ment during the fourth wave."

Calling on South Africans not to panic after the discovery of the latest variant in Botswana and South Africa, Prof Salim Abdool Karim, director for the Centre for Aids Programme of Research in SA, said local public health interventions were effective.

"Vaccines remain effective over time for all past variants – for severe Covid and hospitalisation. While we may see more mild infections from omicron due to antibody escape, there is likely to be less impact on severe disease, as it depends more on T-cells.

"Preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of immune escape from antibodies, likely to lead to increased reinfection cases. But we've dealt with variants before, including with immune escape."
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