

FOURTH WAVE

Calls for calm over new Covid variant

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THE Department of Health has urged South Africans to remain calm and not to panic over the spread of the Omicron Covid-19 variant as the country was "expecting and prepared" for the fourth wave.

While a new variant and mutations were expected, scientists said they were still studying the effects and strength against the current vaccines.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim said they were quite amazed at how fast the number of infections were rising "but we were not caught with our pants down".

"We expected and prepared for a new variant as far back as September.

"The government then invested in building capacity to do genomic frequency. This early evidence has given us the best fighting chance against this

new variant," he said.

Karim was making a presentation during a media briefing held by the Department of Health yesterday following President Cyril Ramaphosa's address to the nation on Sunday night.

Karim said there was still lack of evidence on whether the current vaccines were effective against the new variant, but said that evidence should present itself over the next few weeks.

"But we do expect that vaccines should hold well against hospitalisation of those infected," he said.

The biggest challenge would be preventing superspreader events, he said.

Scientists and the department urged those already vaccinated to motivate others to vaccinate and strictly follow preventative measures such as mask-wearing and washing of hands.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the rise of infections served as a reminder that there was a deadly



PROFESSOR Salim Abdool Karim. |
SIYASANGA MBAMBANI DoC.

virus in the midst and citizens should use what was "tried and tested" in preventing severe cases of Covid-19.

While over 16.5 million South Africans are fully vaccinated, the department said this was a "very small" number compared with unvaccinated people.

So far, early information shows that most Covid-19 patients admitted

to hospital and experiencing severe symptoms are unvaccinated, the department said.

Phaahla presented a state of readiness status to respond to the Omicron variant.

Information so far has shown most patients were presenting similar symptoms as with the other Covid-19 variants. However, in particular, concerns were raised about the rise of infections in young children and babies.

Scientists and experts at the briefing said the Health Department may have to focus on paediatric hospital beds preparedness in this fourth wave.

Providing an epidemiological update from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, Dr Waasila Jassat said Gauteng was the epicentre of the new variant. She said they have seen a sharp increase in infections over the last few days with most cases among 10 to 29 year olds.

She noted an increased number of admissions in Tshwane. However, other regions in Gauteng were also on the increase.

The experts also spoke out against the closing of borders to South Africa, saying there was no science to support such decisions. Phaahla, Karim and International Relations and Co-operation spokesperson Clayton Monyela reiterated the government's frustration at the decision made by other countries. Karim said there was no benefit in closing the borders as the Omicron variant was detected in at least 11 other countries by yesterday.

Monyela said that they received reports from some South Africans stranded in capitals around the world. They should go to the SA embassy for assistance. "Dirco are engaging all the countries with a view to persuade them to reverse this (border-closing) decision." | **Political Bureau**