

New strain is a source of unease

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Sunday Herald Sun

Sunday 28th November 2021

586 words

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ANALYSIS
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WE have a lot to learn about Omicron, the new Covid virus variant discovered this month in southern Africa.

We do know it carries an unusually high number of mutations and the World Health Organisation now designates it a “variant of concern”.

There are various ways a variant can make it on to this horrid list – if it spreads more easily, causes more serious illness, or if current vaccines, treatments, diagnostic tests or other prevention measures do not work as well against it.

Omicron appears to have emerged in South Africa where most cases are concentrated, but has also been detected in Botswana where it was first recognised, and in travellers in Hong Kong and Belgium.

Britain, the EU, US and Singapore imposed travel restrictions from the region,

and, on Saturday, Australia joined them.

We don't yet know the threat that Omicron might pose, and a huge research effort is under way to learn more, but there is already sufficient unease that this may be more infectious to call it a variant of concern, given the rapid rise in cases in South Africa coinciding with its emergence.

The proportion of South Africans fully vaccinated is low at only 25 per cent, not enough to protect the population from a surge in cases even if vaccines are still effective.

But there are also reports of high rates of reinfection, suggesting even prior infection may not be protective.

The one item of encouraging news from our chief medical officer is on reports that most hospital cases are unvaccinated, so there are no signals yet that this variant might escape vaccine protection from serious illness.

Australia has travel restrictions on people who have been in one of nine southern Africa countries in the past 14 days. We are also ensuring that those who have

already arrived, or citizens and permanent residents yet to return, are tested and isolated appropriately.

There is some positive news from South Africa that might help us to stay safe – PCR testing not only still works, but this variant might have a particular signature on certain PCR tests.

Being able to screen for this variant at the preliminary testing stage would help monitor for the variant across all international arrivals as well as in Australia. The earlier you see the variant, the more effective the response can be.

The best-case scenario for Australia is if our high vaccination coverage means Omicron does not pose a threat of rapid spread, more serious illness or treatment failure.

But it will take some weeks to understand the threat and, in the meantime, we must take precautionary measures to keep Omicron out.

Keeping it out is our best protection from more drastic control measures should we decide it poses too great a threat once it's already here.

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The first known confirmed B.1.1.529 or Omicron infection was from a specimen collected on November 9, 2021, in Botswana, according to the World Health Organisation

There are **87** confirmed cases of Omicron in 5 countries.

BELGIUM
1 CASE

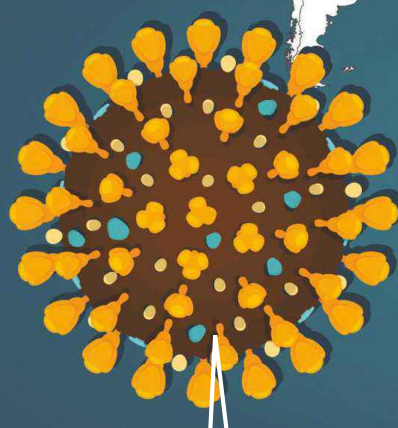
ISRAEL
1 CASE

HONG KONG
2 CASES

SOUTH AFRICA
77 CASES

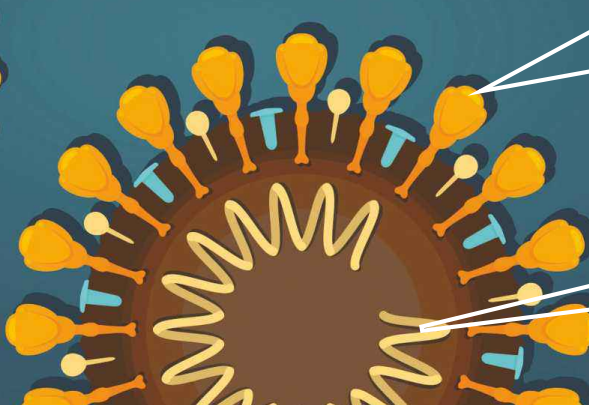
BOTSWANA
6 CASES

WHY THE NEW COVID VARIANT HAS EXPERTS WORRIED



MEMBRANE PROTEIN

A missing mutation (NSP6) could make the virus more transmissible



SPIKE PROTEIN

32 mutations help the virus fight off vaccine-induced antibodies. Three mutations (H655Y, N679K, P681H) help the virus sneak into the body's cell more easily.

NUCLEOCAPSID PROTEIN

Two mutations (R203K and G204R) could make the virus more infectious.