

Health agencies keeping eye on ‘Kraken’ variant

By Brontë H. Lacsamana
Reporter

NICKNAMED after a sea monster, the coronavirus Omicron subvariant XBB 1.5 — or “Kraken” — is the most infectious so far, but the good news is that it’s not any more severe than previous versions, according to infectious disease experts.

While it hasn’t been detected in the Philippines, Kraken is being monitored through genomic biosurveillance.

“XBB 1.5 has around eight major mutations, but it doesn’t carry any mutation associated with potential change in severity,” said Dr. Franco B. Felizarta, a US-based infectious disease

expert, at a Jan. 27 webinar organized by the University of the Philippines.

“In terms of infectiousness, it’s the most infectious today, but in terms of severity, it’s not more severe than the other variants,” he said.

According to the World Health Organization’s risk assessment for XBB 1.5, there’s not much increase in both severity and death, so the subvariant will likely contribute to an increase in cases but not that much in deaths.

It also put a disclaimer that growth estimates are only from the United States, which means “there’s a significant chance the Philippines will not get this variant because it had the original XBB that quickly disappeared anyway,” said Dr. Felizarta.

On Monday, the Philippines posted 1,206 coronavirus cases in the past week, about 36% lower than the 1,891 cases from the previous week, as per a bulletin by the Department of Health. Of the new cases, only one was critical.

Dr. Cynthia P. Saloma, executive director of the Philippine Genome Center, assured the public that they will continue to monitor the variants emerging in the country.

“We’re keeping watch for XBB 1.5, which is said to be the most antibody-evasive variant, but data has shown that vaccination as well as prior infection continue to provide protection against hospitalization and severe disease,” she said.

Dr. Felizarta added that the global population is no longer im-

munologically naive to the virus due to most people having been vaccinated and/or infected.

“Globally there’s only a slight increase in daily deaths, much lower than all variants before,” he said. “This is also despite the increasing worldwide mobility, even in countries with minimal masking and social distancing.”

The hybrid immunity that comes with vaccination and/or infection will help transition COVID-19 from a pandemic to an epidemic. However, the immunocompromised, the elderly, and those with multiple comorbidities are still prone to severe cases and death.

“They’re the ones that have to be regularly boosted,” said Dr. Felizarta.

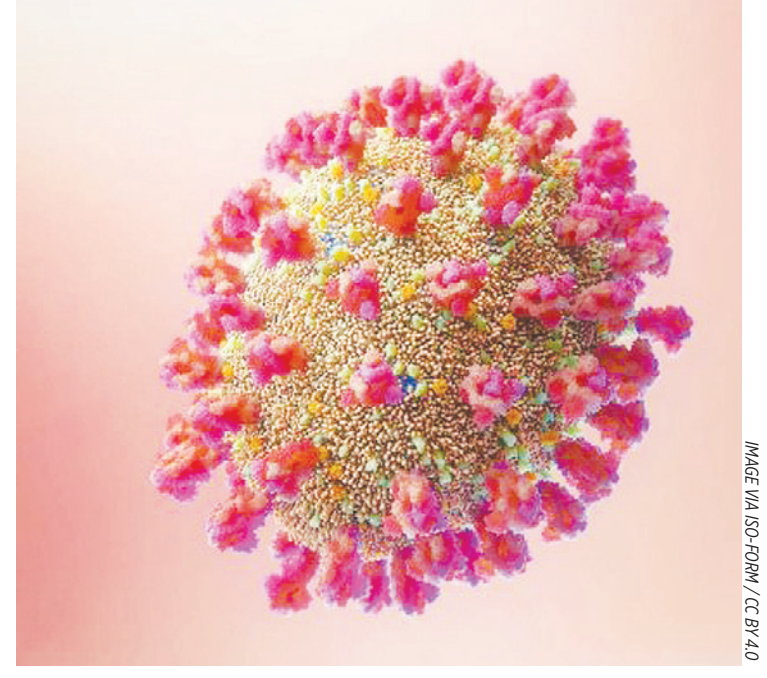


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All countries ‘dangerously unprepared’ for future pandemics, says IFRC

WHO remains on high alert; US to end COVID-19 emergency May 11

GENEVA — The world is “dangerously unprepared” for future pandemics, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) say in a report published on Monday, calling on countries to update their preparedness plans by year-end.

In its *World Disasters Report 2022*, the IFRC said “all countries remain dangerously unprepared for future outbreaks” despite coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) killing more people than any earthquake, drought or hurricane in history.

“The next pandemic could be just around the corner. If the experience of COVID-19 won’t quicken our steps toward preparedness, what will?” said Jagan Chapagain, secretary general of the IFRC, the world’s largest disaster response network.

“There will be no excuse for a continued lack of preparedness after having gone through three terrible years.”

The report said that countries should review their legislation to ensure it is in line with their pandemic preparedness plans by the end of 2023 and adopt a

new treaty and revised International Health Regulations by next year that would invest more in the readiness of local communities.

It also recommended that countries increase domestic health finance by 1% of gross domestic product and global health finance by at least \$15 billion per year, which Mr. Chapagain described as a “good investment to make.”

“The important thing is there has to be a political will to commit to that,” he said. “If it is there, it’s possible.”

HIGHEST ALERT

The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday that COVID-19 continues to constitute a public health emergency of international concern, its highest form of alert.

The pandemic was likely in a “transition point” that continues to need careful management to “mitigate the potential negative consequences,” the agency added in a statement.

It is three years since the WHO first declared that COVID represented a global health emergency. More than



REUTERS

6.8 million people have died during the outbreak, which has touched every country on Earth, ravaging communities and economies.

However, the advent of vaccines and treatments has changed the pandemic situation considerably since 2020, and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said he hopes to see an end to the emergency this year, particu-

larly if access to the counter-measures can be improved globally.

“We remain hopeful that in the coming year, the world will transition to a new phase in which we reduce (COVID) hospitalizations and deaths to their lowest possible level,” Mr. Ghebreyesus told a separate WHO meeting on Monday.

Advisers to the WHO expert committee on the pandemic’s status told

Reuters in December that it was likely not the moment to end the emergency given the uncertainty over the wave of infections in China after it lifted its strict zero-COVID measures at the end of 2022.

US TO DECLARE END OF COVID EMERGENCY

Meanwhile, in Washington, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.’s administration on Monday said it will end COVID-19 emergency declarations on May 11, nearly three years after the United States imposed sweeping pandemic measures to curb the spread of the illness.

The COVID-19 national emergency and public health emergency (PHE) were put in place in 2020 by then-President Donald J. Trump. Mr. Biden has repeatedly extended the measures, which allow millions of Americans to receive free tests, vaccines and treatments.

The White House’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said in a statement the declarations, which were set to expire in the coming months, would be extended again until May 11 and then terminated.

“This wind-down would align with the Administration’s previous commitments to give at least 60 days’ notice prior to termination of the PHE,” OMB said in an administration policy statement.

The government has been paying for COVID-19 vaccines, some tests and certain treatments under the PHE declaration. When it expires, those costs will be transferred to private insurance and government health plans.

PHE’s expiration will also end directives, known as Title 42, that expel migrants from Nicaragua, Cuba and Haiti caught crossing the US-Mexico border back to Mexico, OMB said.

OMB said in a separate statement that Mr. Biden would veto a proposed bill in the US Congress that would eliminate COVID-19 vaccine mandates for healthcare providers working on certain federal programs.

COVID-19 cases are declining in the United States, though more than 500 people continue to die each day from the disease, government data showed. — Reuters

OPINION

Medical decisions in the best interest of patients

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently issued an advisory against unethical business practices related to the promotion of prescription products and medical devices.

Signed by FDA Director General Samuel Zacate, Advisory 2022-2045 reads “in the interest of service, and to ensure that medical decisions are made in the best interest of patients, the Food and Drug Administration warns all Prescription Pharmaceutical Products and Medical Devices companies, and Healthcare Professionals, not to engage in unethical business practices.”

Based on Administrative Order (AO) No. 2015-0053 titled “Implementing Guidelines on the Promotion and Marketing of Prescription Pharmaceutical Products and Medical Devices,” the Advisory is relevant to the government and the healthcare community’s campaign for integrity.

It has long been established that the ethical promotion of prescription medicines is vital to the pharmaceutical industry’s mission of helping patients through research and development of new and innovative medicines.

Ethical promotion helps to ensure that healthcare professionals (HCPs) have access to the right information they need and that right patients have access to the right medicines at the right time.

For example, the interactions between manufacturers of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) medicines and vaccines with medical frontliners have been key in saving people’s lives.

In guiding these interactions, the Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP) developed its own Code of Practice aligned with global and regional codes as well as national laws.

The Code seeks to preserve the independence of the decisions taken by healthcare professionals in prescribing medicines to patients. It also emphasizes that industry relationships with HCPs must support, and be consistent with the professional responsibilities they have with their patients.

In its 2020 edition, the PHAP Code said that pharmaceutical companies must maintain high ethical standards in the conduct of promotional activities to HCPs, patient groups, and patient organizations and comply with applicable legal, regulatory, professional requirements and international guidelines on face-to-face and virtual interactions.

Compliance to the Code of Practice is a prerequisite to membership, and is governed by an independent ethics committee which is composed of the country’s health and academic luminaries.

Citing AO 2015-0053, the FDA said that the industry-HCP relationships shall be based on ethics and transparency to assure the independence of HCP’s medical decisions and focus on protecting patients’ welfare.

Also, relationships between company personnel and HCPs shall encourage the development of a healthcare practice committed to patients’ well-being based on truthful, accurate and updated scientific evidence.

The AO directed that PPPMD companies have the ethical obligation to ensure that their interactions with HCPs are in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations.

Moreover, it restated provisions on promotional information and activities. It said that no PPPMD company shall employ or contract any HCP or health worker to promote, advertise, or endorse any pharmaceutical products or medical device in mass media, print, audiovisual display, or social media.

The Advisory likewise included provisions on entertainment and recreation. It said that to ensure appropriate focus on education and informational exchange, and to avoid the

appearance of impropriety, prescription pharmaceutical products and medical devices (PPPMD) companies shall not provide any form of entertainment that would incur expenses for recreational items such as tickets to the theater or sporting events, sporting equipment, or leisure or vacation trips, to any HCP.

It added that entertainment or recreational benefits shall not be offered regardless of 1) the value of the items; 2) whether the company engages the HCP as a speaker or consultant; or 3) whether the entertainment or recreation is secondary to an educational purpose.

Relatedly, no stand-alone entertainment or other leisure or social activities shall be provided or paid for by companies during scientific meetings. PPPMD companies are also prohibited from paying any travel sponsorship, meals, or other expenses of accompanying guests or family members of HCPs.

In connection with educational items and gifts, any item which does not have any direct patient benefit or is not related to the work of the HCP shall not be permitted.

Finally, gifts or personal services and benefits unrelated to the work of the HCP shall not be provided by any PPPMD company representative to an HCP or members of the families. When these are followed, all medical decisions will be in the best interest of patients.

MEDICINE CABINET TEODORO B. PADILLA

TEODORO B. PADILLA is the executive director of the Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP), which represents the biopharmaceutical medicines and vaccines industry in the country. Its members are at the forefront of research and development efforts for COVID-1 and other diseases that affect Filipinos.



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