

COVID 19 – South African Variant B 1.1.529 “Omicron”

By Nigel Griffiths (2021-11-26)

It has emerged from South Africa that a new variant of COVID 19 has been discovered which is considered a variant of interest with mutations capable of avoiding the immune response. Very little is known about this particular variant, with its discovery being only in the last few days. There are virtually no scientific papers available on the subject, although one or two scientists of note have commented on the developments in South Africa. The two primary considerations are firstly, the severity of transmissibility and secondly, how vaccines are susceptible to the variants.

I have considered information provided by:

- Professor Tulio de Oliveira (Telemboss University and the University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Innovation and Sequencing Platform KRISP South Africa)
- Dr Mary Stephen (World Health Organisation Regional Advisor Africa)
- Professor Yuen Kwok-yung (Professor of Microbiology University of Hong Kong)

In summary, the new variant has been discovered and genome sequencing has been conducted. It is early days to come to any conclusion but the fact that there are 32 spike protein mutations, by comparison to the 13 to 17 seen in the Delta variant (Indian variant), raises concerns with regards to vaccines' efficacy, and the subsequent severity of transmissibility. Genetic sequencing has demonstrated 22 cases so far in South Africa.

Treatment presently is as for COVID 19. The South African Government has not released any information, specifically pertaining to the variant infected patients, and one assumes as they have not advised to the contrary, that the patients are being hospitalised in a regular isolation ward (and not intensive care).

The only case to occur outside of Africa has been in Hong Kong which arose from a person visiting South Africa. He, in turn, seems to have infected a further individual who was being quarantined in the opposite room of the Regal Airport Hotel in Hong Kong.

Social distancing and mask wearing, together with the customary vaccination (including booster), are recommended by the professionals mentioned above. South Africa was expecting its fourth wave of COVID 19, so an increase in the number of cases was to be anticipated. It is difficult at the moment to know exactly how many are infected with the aforementioned variant.

Professor Yung has been keen to point out that he believes the transmission in Hong Kong was related to reusable masks which have an exhaust valve which fails to filter exhaled air. This mask is presently being banned in Hong Kong.

What advice could we give to the shipping industry at this stage:

- Caution in the extreme, and await scientific evidence with regards how we should proceed.
- Social distancing must be enforced.
- Face masks must be worn.
- Masks with exhaust valves should not be used.

Travel restrictions have been put in place by the United Kingdom as from week 47, banning flights from the following countries; Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Similar restrictions are being put into place by other countries.