HINDSIGHT

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With frequent mutations occurring, the latest Coronavirus variant ie B.1.1.529 was named Omicron by the WHO. This variant's uncovering is the cause of a vigorous global reaction. Located in Southern Africa, many nations from that region have succumbed to a travel ban as this variant is claimed to be more transmittable, Omicron has been labelled as a more lethal variant by the WHO due to its several mutations, the greater chance of reinfection etc. The imposed travel bans however weren't enough or too late as the Omicron was detected upto Asia in Hong Kong and even Europe in Belgium. The steady rate of infection has taken over several countries in Southern Africa and it doesn't seem to be nearing a halt anytime soon. The biggest concern is the exponential increase in mutations was unexpected to say the least. The high transmission rate was credited to this and could therefore lead to an avoidance of immunity and take it to a stage where to its too late to put a hold on.

Further details on the subject revealed the first case in Hong Kong. which was shortly allowed by a second one. The first being transmitted from a South African to the Hong Kong national with the second being located in a group of returning travelers situated in a hotel that was quarantined. This fear of its rapid spread was worsened when the & ECFDPC stated that the chances of B.1.1.529's spread to Europe ranged from high to very high. These suspicions were confirmed by the Belgian government that identified an unvaccinated person as the first sighting of the new variant in Europe. This was followed by the first Italian Case in Campania ,Mozambique being the source. The rest of Europe eventually chimed in as two more cases were detected in Munich, Germany. These were said to be passengers arriving from Cape Town according to the Bavarian Ministry of Health.

The concerns with this variant were the mutations which distinguish it from previously identified viruses. Most viruses undergo frequent mutations including the one that leads to Caovid-19. These however don't affect the behavior of the virus and its side effects. Omicron was an exception to this trend as according to the dean of Browning University's schools of Public Health Public Health Dr Ashish Jha, the variant was “acting differently” and it "looks like it's much more contagious than the Delta variant". These discoveries have inevitably led to immediate action as several nations like the U.S have added to the trade bans and has therefore caused a net fall in many markets in Asia, Europe and the U.S itself. Dr Ashish wasn't the only

one to stress omicron's risk as a professor at Warwick Medical school, Lawrence Young, also deemed the variant to be "very worrying". Young also claimed that “it is the most heavily mutated version of the virus we have seen to date. This variant carries some changes we've seen previously in other variants but never all together in one virus. It also has novel mutations” These mutations are numbered at 50 with over 30 being detected in the spike protein which is responsible for the virus's intrusion into cells.

The situation in South Africa has worsened as a professor at the University, Sharon Peacock reported on this topic. She claimed that the comparatively lower number of cases in south Africa was deceptive as the past week showed a rapid rise in cases. The numbers rose from 273 to 1200 plus within a time period of 9 days. She also stated that certain mutations in Omicron were similar to those found in previous variants that were prone to evading immunity. As stated before, reinfection was a possibility, however the vaccination may be enough to prevent severe symptoms and possibly fatalities in those that had been vaccinated as claimed by the UK government chief scientific advisor, Patrick Vallance.

As of now, it's evident that we don't know enough as several scientists and professors deemed it too early to come to a conclusion. De Oliviera has attributed the covid-19 vaccinations as the best defense mechanism as of now with further testing to be done to it to add to its efficiency. The origin of the new mutations is still undetermined which requires further research. Though the first identified case traced back to South Africa, the origin itself isn't that obvious. Moderna a leading production company for the Vaccine stated that the newer combinations posed a major threat as it could accelerate the effectiveness of the natural and vaccine induced immunity.

South Africa's urgency to the issue was acclaimed all over the world as it led to fast action. When cases in Gauteng rose at a relatively higher rate, experts focused on that province which allowed the quick detection of this variant. With the US imposing travel bans on many countries and many EU countries blocking off travel from southern Africa, the action taken is urgent and effective. Nations like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel etc tool part in imposing these restrictions. South Africa itself has dealt with three covid - 19 waves which made it a major target for travel bans. The newer infections are low in quantity with positivity levels below 5%. Government officials have predicted a fourth wave too. 35.37% South Africa' adult population has been fully vaccinated and the rate of people initiating vaccines has fallen in recent days.

To sum it up although faced with a tougher challenge, Southern Africa's urgent response is vital in eradicating the threat. The future holds the answer to the success of this venture.