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Southern DAILY

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Inside C2

Monday, April 12 2021

‘When will it end?’: How a changing virus is reshaping scientists’ views on COVID-19

FILE PHOTO: A healthcare worker draws the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine from a vial at Dignity Health Glendale Memorial Hospital and Health Center in Glendale, California, U.S., December 17, 2020. REUTERS/Lucy Nicholson/File Photo

CHICAGO (Reuters) - Chris Murray, a University of Washington disease expert whose projections on COVID-19 infections and deaths are closely followed worldwide, is changing his assumptions about the course of the pandemic.

FILE PHOTO: A healthcare worker draws the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine from a vial at Dignity Health Glendale Memorial Hospital and Health Center in Glendale, California, U.S., December 17, 2020. REUTERS/Lucy Nicholson/File Photo

Murray had until recently been hopeful that the discovery of several effective vaccines could help countries achieve herd immunity, or nearly eliminate transmission through a combination of inoculation and previous infection. But in the last month, data from a vaccine trial in South Africa showed not only that a rapidly-spreading coronavirus variant could dampen the effect of the vaccine, it could also evade natural immunity in people who had been previously infected.

“I couldn’t sleep” after seeing the data, Murray, director of the Seattle-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, told Reuters. “When will it end?” he asked himself, referring to the pandemic. He is currently updating his model to account for variants’ ability to escape natural immunity and expects to provide new projections as early as this week.

A new consensus is emerging among scientists, according to Reuters interviews with 18 specialists who closely track the pandemic or are working to curb its impact. Many described how the breakthrough late last year of two vaccines with around 95% efficacy against COVID-19 had initially sparked hope that the virus could be largely contained, similar to the way measles has been.

But, they say, data in recent weeks on new variants from South Africa and Brazil has undercut that optimism. They now believe that SARS-CoV-2 will not only remain with us as an endemic virus, continuing to circulate in communities, but will likely cause a significant burden of illness and death for years to come.

As a result, the scientists said, people could expect to continue to take measures such as routine mask-wearing and avoiding crowded places during COVID-19 surges, especially for people at high risk.
Even after vaccination, “I still would want to wear a mask if there was a variant out there,” Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical advisor to U.S. President Joe Biden, said in an interview. “All you need is one little flick of a variant (sparking) another surge, and there goes your prediction” about when life gets back to normal.

Some scientists, including Murray, acknowledge that the outlook could improve. The new vaccines, which have been developed at record speed, still appear to prevent hospitalizations and death even when new variants are the cause of infection. Many vaccine developers are working on booster shots and new inoculations that could preserve a high level of efficacy against the variants. And, scientists say there is still much to be learned about the immune system’s ability to combat the virus.

Already, COVID-19 infection rates have declined in many countries since the start of 2021, with some dramatic reductions in severe illness and hospitalizations among the first groups of people to be vaccinated.

WORSE THAN FLU

Murray said if the South African variant, or similar mutants, continue to spread rapidly, the number of COVID-19 cases resulting in hospitalization or death this coming winter could be four times higher than the flu. The rough estimate assumes a 65% effective vaccine given to half of a country’s population. In a worst-case scenario, that could represent as many as 200,000 U.S. deaths related to COVID-19 over the winter period, based on federal government estimates of annual flu fatalities.
His institute’s current forecast, which runs to June 1, assumes there will be an additional 62,000 U.S. deaths and 690,000 global deaths from COVID-19 by that point. The model includes assumptions about vaccination rates as well as the transmissibility of the South African and Brazilian variants.

The shift in thinking among scientists has influenced more cautious government statements about when the pandemic will end. Britain last week said it expects a slow emergence from one of the world’s strictest lockdowns, despite having one of the fastest vaccination drives.
U.S. government predictions of a return to a more normal lifestyle have been repeatedly pushed back, most recently from late summer to Christmas, and then to March 2022. Israel issues “Green Pass” immunity documents to people who have recovered from COVID-19 or been vaccinated, allowing them back into hotels or theaters. The documents are only valid for six months because it’s not clear how long immunity will last.
“What does it mean to be past the emergency phase of this pandemic?,” said Stefan Baral, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. While some experts have asked whether countries could completely eradicate any case of COVID-19 through vaccines and stringent lockdowns, Baral sees the goals as more modest, but still meaningful. “In my mind, it’s that hospitals aren’t full, the ICUs aren’t full, and people aren’t tragically passing,” he said.

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

LOCAL NEWS

Biden beefs up White House staff, including Big Tech critic Tim Wu

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President Joe Biden on Friday rounded out his White House staff with a top adviser who has advocated for breaking up Big Tech companies along with a host of new appointments focused on COVID-19, criminal justice and the economy.

FILE PHOTO: A view of the White House in Washington, U.S. January 18, 2021. REUTERS/Jim Bourg/File Photo

The White House announced six additional staffers to its National Economic Council, including Columbia University professor Tim Wu, who coined the term "net neutrality" and has warned against an economy dominated by a few giant firms.

Wu authored "The Curse of Bigness: Antitrust in the New Gilded Age" in 2018, in which he warned about the inequalities created by extreme economic concentration.

"I think breakups or undoing of mergers are actually called for more than we have appreciated in the last few decades," Wu has said previously about Big Tech companies.

Wu served as senior enforcement counsel to the New York Attorney General and as adviser at the Federal Trade Commission and the National Economic Council.

"Putting this twitter feed on hold for now -- so long!" Wu, said in a post on Friday.

His appointment is a win for progressives, who have pushed for tougher scrutiny of Big Tech firms such as Facebook, Twitter, Amazon and Google and is likely to shape the White House's approach on tougher antitrust enforcement.

Google and Facebook have been sued by federal and state regulators for using their dominance to hurt rivals whereas Amazon and Apple are still under investigation.

Senator Amy Klobuchar, chair of the Senate Judiciary Antitrust Committee, said Wu's appointment shows the administration is serious about promoting competition in the United States. "America has a major monopoly problem that must be urgently addressed," she said.

Congressional Democrats have already begun talks with the White House on ways to crack down on tech companies, including holding them accountable for disinformation and addressing their market power.

Several Republicans have also sought to hit back at Big Tech, including efforts to scrap a law known as Section 230 that shields online companies for liability over users' posted content.

In the White House statement on new staff, Biden also named 13 additions to his Domestic Policy Council and two more staffers to the White House COVID-19 response team.

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Editor's Choice

A Soyuz-2.1b rocket booster with a Fregat upper stage and satellites of British firm OneWeb blasts off from a launchpad at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Amur Region, Russia. Russian space agency Roscosmos/via REUTERS

People lay flowers on the police car of officer Eric Talley who died Monday responding to a call where a gunman opened fire on people in a King Soopers grocery store in Boulder, Colorado. REUTERS/ Kevin Mohatt

People attend a ground breaking ceremony to inaugurate the start of construction on the first phase of a project to eventually build 50,000 new apartments, in Pyongyang, North Korea. KCNA via REUTERS

Asylum seeking migrant families from Central America line up to be transported from a make shift U.S. Customs and Border Protection processing center under the Anzalduas International Bridge after crossing the Rio Grande river into the United States from Mexico in Granjeno, Texas. REUTERS/Adrees Latif

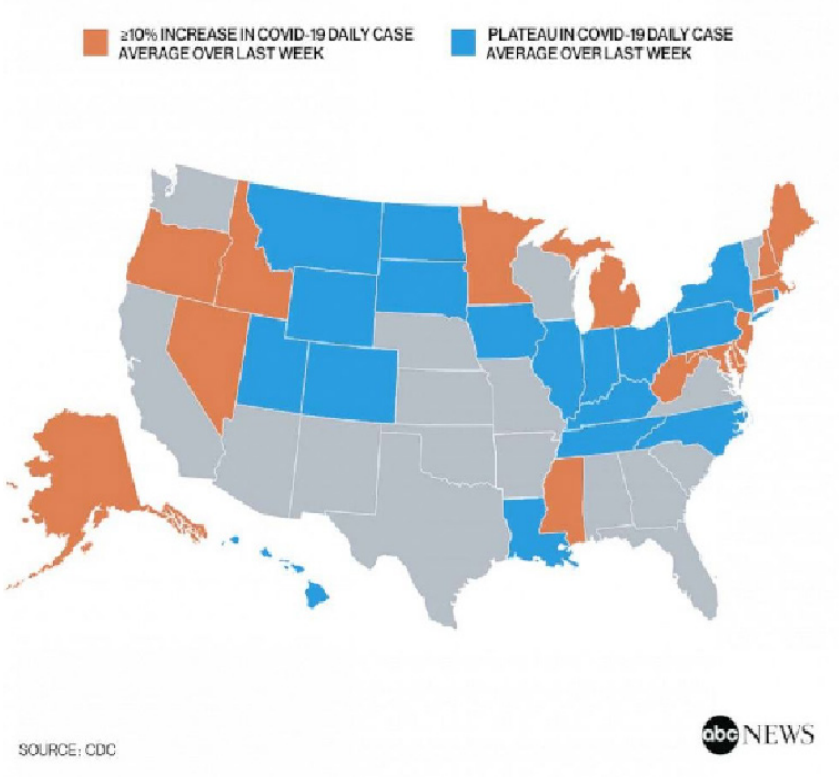
King Soopers shooting suspect Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, 21, appears before Boulder District Court Judge Thomas Mulvahill at the Boulder County Justice Center in Boulder, Colorado. Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post

Ashley Cain-Gribble and Timothy Leduc of the U.S. in action during the pairs short program at the World Figure Skating Championships in Stockholm, Sweden. TT News Agency/Anders Wiklund

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

Coronavirus Cases Hold Steady At 65,000 Per Day



Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Coronavirus cases are holding steady across the U.S. as vaccinations increase and states continue to loosen their safety measures.

By the numbers: The U.S. averaged about 65,000 new cases per day over the past week, essentially unchanged from the week before.

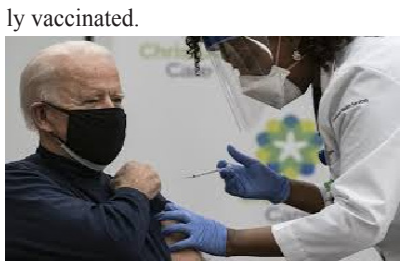
• Daily case counts increased in 13 states and declined in nine.

• The biggest improvement was in Alabama, which saw a 33% drop in new cases. The biggest deterioration was in Nebraska, which saw a 52% jump. (Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts suggested the jump could be partly due to a data issue.)

• Michigan, which has emerged as a hotspot in the latest phase of the pandemic, recorded an average of about 6,700 new cases per day over the past week, up 24% from the week before.

• But things improved in New York, which has also emerged as a potential hotspot in the pandemic's burgeoning fourth wave. Daily cases there were down by about 7% over the past week.

What we're watching: The U.S. administered an average of 3 million vaccine doses per day over the past week, according to Bloomberg's vaccine tracker. Roughly 33% of American adults have gotten at least one shot, and 19% are fully vaccinated.



President Biden receives his second vaccine dose.

The bottom line: The vaccines will ultimately be our way out of this pandemic, if Americans keep getting vaccinated at this rate. The big question is how quick and how clean that ending will be.

• Hovering around 65,000 cases per day, even with such rapid vaccinations, means that a significant fourth wave is still on the table.

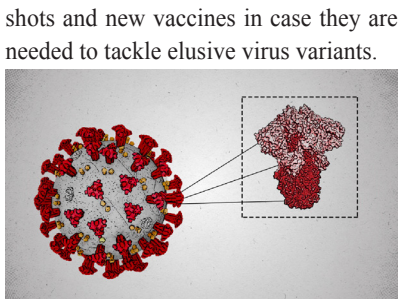
• It almost certainly wouldn't be as deadly as previous surges, but it could give rise to more new variants and ultimately prolong COVID-19's presence in our lives. (Courtesy axios.com)

Related

Covid-19 Variant Vaccines In The Works At Johnson & Johnson

Single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine is effective against COVID-19 variants

The company, which recently launched a COVID-19 vaccine, is probing booster shots and new vaccines in case they are needed to tackle elusive virus variants.



As highly transmissible coronavirus variants sweep across the world, scientists are racing to understand why these new versions of the virus are spreading faster, and what this could mean for vaccine efforts. New research says the key may be the spike protein, which gives the coronavirus its unmistakable shape. Illustration: Nick Collingwood/WSJ

Johnson & Johnson is working on several next-generation versions of its Covid-19 vaccine that may be needed to bolster protection against some of the coronavirus variants that have emerged. J&J Chief Executive Alex Gorsky said Thursday he was hopeful J&J's newly authorized vaccine and other current Covid-19 shots provide some protection against new variants, but booster shots or modified versions of original vaccines might be needed.

"We have to be prepared," Mr. Gorsky said Thursday. "We should prepare for the worst and hope for the best."

J&J's original Covid-19 vaccine was authorized by U.S. regulators in late February. In a late-stage trial, the shot was 66% effective at protecting people in a large international study from moderate to severe Covid-19 disease.

But its efficacy was lower in the South Africa portion of the trial, where a variant has spread that has shown resistance to vaccines that were designed to work primarily against an earlier version of the virus that circulated widely last year.

Johnson & Johnson and the FDA on Wednesday released respective detailed analysis on the one-shot COVID-19 vaccine, with the FDA announcing the company's data meets the requirements for the emergency use authorization review process.

FDA scientists found that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was 85% effective at preventing severe illness in clinical trials and 66% effective at preventing COVID-19 cases with any symptoms.

Empty vials that contained a dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine against the COVID-19 coronavirus at the Klerksdorp Hospital on Feb. 18, 2021. (Phill Magakoe/AFP via Getty Images, FILE)

Importantly, the data released shows the vaccine works against all variants. The vaccine was less effective at preventing symptomatic illness in South Africa, where the variant first detected there is dominant, but it was still highly effective at preventing severe disease there. J&J also released preliminary data indicating the vaccine likely helps prevent asymptomatic infections, and that the Brazil variant doesn't appear to have as much of an impact on vaccine efficacy as the South African variant.

J&J expects said they would have 100 million doses by the end of June in addition to the 4 million doses already delivered. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is authorized for adults over 18.

When combined with the supply of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, which both require two doses, the U.S. is expected to have enough vaccine for 130 million adults by the end of March.

The vaccine won't be authorized until Friday or later. First, there will be a public hearing Friday, in which the FDA's independent advisory committee will give an authorization recommendation for or against. The FDA could then make its decision as early as Friday evening.

"Although we are cautious not to prejudge the outcome of the ongoing FDA review process, we believe that our single dose vaccine will be a critical tool for fighting this global pandemic," Richard Nettles, vide president of medical affairs for Jannsen Pharmaceutical Companies testified in a congressional hearing this week.

The FDA found no serious safety concerns with mild side effects like pain at the site of injection, headache, or fatigue. About 9% of volunteers who received the vaccine had a fever. (Courtesy https://abcnews.go.com/)

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

COVID-19 Hospitalizations In Texas On The Decline

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

The number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in Texas fell again last Sunday after dipping below 10,000 for the first time since December on Saturday.

There were 9,652 people in Texas hospitals with confirmed cases of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus on Sunday, according to the Department of State Health Services. That's the lowest figure recorded since Dec. 16.

State health officials reported 5,278 new, confirmed cases of the virus Sunday, 1,499 probable cases and 167 more fatalities. Texas has reported 38,643 COVID-19 deaths and more than 2.16 million cases since the pandemic began. The actual number of cases is believed to be far higher because many people haven't been tested and some who get sick don't show symptoms.

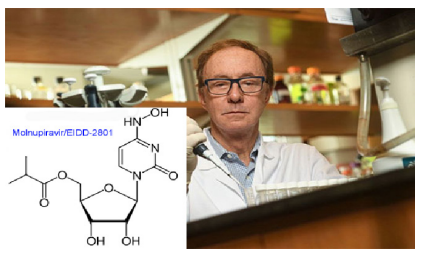
Over the past week, more than 16% of COVID-19 tests in Texas have come back positive, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms that clear up within weeks. But for others, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, the virus can cause severe illness and be fatal. (Courtesy fox26Houston.com)

Related

Drug Launched At Emory Univ. Reduces Virus That Causes COVID-19 To Undetectable Levels

An antiviral drug initially discovered by Emory's non-profit drug development company DRIVE appears safe and reduces SARS-CoV-2 to undetectable levels in COVID-19 patients after five days of administration, according to data from a Phase II clinical trial in the United States.

Molnupiravir, previously known as EIDD-2801, can be provided as a pill in an outpatient setting, which could be a step up in ease of distribution and convenience. Although remdesivir and antiviral monoclonal antibodies have received Emergency Use Authorizations from the FDA, they must be given intravenously or by injection. In addition, drugs like molnupiravir could flexibly tackle SARS-CoV-2 variants, which have emerged as a concern in recent months.



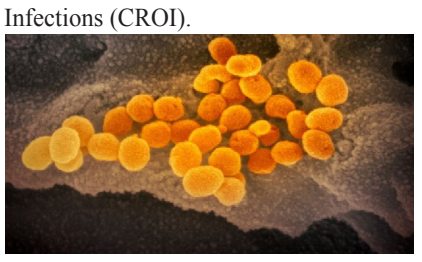
George Painter, CEO of DRIVE and director of the Emory Institute for Drug Development

"There's still an urgent need for an antiviral drug against SARS-CoV-2 that can be easily produced, transported, stored, and administered," says George Painter, PhD, CEO of DRIVE (Drug Innovation Ventures at Emory) and director of the Emory Institute for Drug Development.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, DRIVE quickly repurposed a broad-spectrum antiviral drug it had been developing against influenza and equine encephalitis. Molnupiravir is being developed further by Merck and its partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics, a closely held biotechnology company, which licensed the drug from DRIVE last year. All funds for the post-licensing development of EIDD-2801/molnupiravir have been provided by Ridgeback and Merck.

In the most recent clinical study, molnupiravir eliminated infectious coronavirus from nose swabs within five days in all of the people taking it. For comparison, a quarter of people receiving placebo still had detectable virus in their nose swabs at day five.

Emory physicians were not involved in the clinical trial, which recruited 202 adults with COVID-19 symptoms at outpatient clinics in the United States. The data were presented at the recent Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI).



This scanning electron microscope image shows SARS-CoV-2 (orange) — also known as 2019-nCoV, the virus that causes COVID-19. (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases-Rocky Mountain Laboratories, NIH)

While molnupiravir is proven to interfere with coronavirus replication in infected patients, more data is required to determine whether it can prevent severe illness. Merck and Ridgeback say that more results from the U.S. clinical trial will be shared when they become available, and additional Phase 2 and 2/3 clinical studies are underway. Molnupiravir has also been tested for safety in a clinical trial in the United Kingdom.

Molnupiravir works by forcing the viral enzyme that copies SARS-CoV-2's genetic material to make so many mistakes that the virus can't replicate. Still, Merck's comprehensive testing indicates that high doses of the drug are not mutagenic in animals. Emory scientists, in collaboration with top coronavirus experts at other universities, have previously shown that EIDD-2801 is highly effective at interfering with coronavirus replication and transmission in animal models and also in mice implanted with human lung tissue. EIDD-2801 has broad spectrum activity against a number of diseases of public health concern, including influenza, SARS-CoV-1, MERS, chikungunya, Ebola and equine encephalitis. The drug was initially developed with the support of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, and the Georgia Research Alliance's Venture Development program.

Emory Healthcare Administers 100,000 Doses Of COVID-19 Vaccine

ATLANTA – Emory Healthcare celebrated a big milestone last week. The health system has administered 100,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine as of today to its patients and employees who have met criteria as defined by the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH). Emory marked this occasion as Georgia Governor Brian Kemp opened up vaccinations to all adults, 16 and older, today.

Emory Healthcare patient Alison Danforth, who is six-months pregnant, received the 100,000th dose of COVID-19 vaccine at Emory's Northlake Vaccine Clinic on March 25. Danforth recently had discussions with her Emory obstetrics team and decided getting the vaccine was overall the best choice for protecting herself and her child.

Emory Healthcare's 100,000th COVID-19 vaccine recipient, Alison Danforth.

"We are thrilled to have reached the momentous occasion of administering 100,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to our patients and employees who have met eligibility as defined by Georgia DPH," says Jonathan S. Lewin, MD, CEO of Emory Healthcare. "We are excited to now be able to offer all Emory Healthcare patients and Emory University students, faculty and staff ages 16 and up access to COVID-19 vaccines."

The Northlake vaccine clinic can accommodate up to several thousand people a day for both dose one and dose two COVID-19 vaccinations. (Courtesy https://news.emory.edu/)