

The current COVID-19 situation in our Region continues to be of concern. As of 22 January 2022, there have been more than 18.2 million cases reported, and almost 320,000 deaths as a result of COVID-19. This marks a 37% increase in cases compared to the previous week, and a 186% increase in cases compared to the same time last year.

While we don't have the exact figures from countries regarding hospitalizations attributed to Omicron, there is an increased burden on health care systems and health care workers as a direct result of the new variant that comprises the majority of new cases detected.

Many of us who were aware of only a few people in our immediate circles being infected last year, are now seeing the virus appear in our own homes and among those closest to us. And let me be clear - Omicron can still cause a full spectrum of disease: from asymptomatic infection, mild infection, hospitalization, and even death.

As countries face increasing cases and deaths, we are seeing increasing signs of COVID-19 fatigue among the public, as well as concern about the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, and confusion around booster doses and the effectiveness of available vaccines against the new variants.

The virus is trying to remain one step ahead of us, as we collectively work to contain it. Omicron will not be the last variant. As long as we have disease transmission, together with low levels of vaccination coverage and limited adherence to prevention measures in our Region, we are contributing to the sharp increase currently observed, and are only prolonging the acute phase of this pandemic.

For more than two years, WHO has provided guidance and recommendations for countries and individuals regarding the actions required to help end this pandemic. As we have learnt more about the virus and its capacity to spread and mutate, we continue to regularly update our recommendations. But throughout this time, our position on several points has been clear.

Firstly, ending the pandemic requires a committed whole-of-government and whole-of-society response. In countries such as Bahrain, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, where the

highest levels of leadership were actively engaged in the response, we saw a good overall response to the pandemic last year and successful vaccination drives.

Secondly, surveillance, testing, isolation, contact tracing and treatment remain the key components of any national response. Countries must keep accelerating their national response to contain the increasing numbers of cases and implement any restrictions based on risk assessments. In that process, we need to protect the most vulnerable in our communities and to protect both our health systems and health workers from becoming overwhelmed.

Thirdly, adherence to public health and social measures, and expanding vaccination, is crucial. These are the proven ways to protect yourself and others: get vaccinated, wear a mask, wash or sanitize hands, practice physical distancing, ventilate closed spaces, avoid crowds, and practice proper cough and sneezing etiquette. We all have a role to play in protecting our loved ones and those in our communities.

Lastly, in the spirit of our Regional vision “Health for All, by All”, we continue to emphasize the need for coordination and collaboration among countries and the engagement of various partners. Containing the pandemic in one country alone is not a solution. We encourage countries, especially high-income countries with strong responses, to share resources, lessons learned and best practices with those who have limited capacities. To date, we have seen good examples of resource sharing from countries such as Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, who have provided vaccine doses to other countries within and outside the Region.

As we experience a spike in cases, we have an opportunity to accelerate our response efforts and come closer to ending this pandemic. Lives are at risk every day, and our priority is to reduce severe infection and death. For this to happen, we need to keep in mind the following:

Omicron can cause severe disease and strain our health systems. While most cases due to the variant may be milder in severity, it is still causing hospitalizations and deaths, and even less severe cases are overwhelming health facilities.

Vaccines save lives. Most current infections occur in unvaccinated people, and vaccines remain highly effective at protecting against serious illness, hospitalization and death, even from the Omicron variant.

New treatments are at hand. Recently, WHO recommended two new COVID-19 treatments, increasing the tools used to fight severe illness and death. These are a rheumatoid arthritis drug called baricitinib and a monoclonal antibody called sotrovimab. WHO is working with partners through the ACT-Accelerator to make sure that these treatments are also available for low- and middle-income countries.

Health care workers are the backbone of the response, and they need to be respected, protected and provided with the tools and information to do their work as efficiently as possible, and without unduly risking their own safety.

Societies and individuals are key players in the new world we now live in, and their constructive actions, positive spirit and sense of community play a critical role in leading us to the end of pandemic.

Although we are now entering the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have made progress in several key areas, especially in the development of an effective range of tools. The pandemic has shown us that governments and societies have tremendous potential for collective action and change when faced with a common threat. Perhaps our biggest challenges remain the misinformation, disinformation, politicization and fatigue that COVID-19 has generated. We all have a role in countering these challenges.

Let us regain the spirit, determination and momentum that brought us all together at the beginning of the pandemic, so that we can defeat this virus before it has a chance to further spread and mutate. Let us replace complacency with action, and grief with hope.

Sunday 28th of April 2024 10:25:21 PM