

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Pretending the Pandemic Is Over Will Not Make It So

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By The Editorial Board

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The worst of the Covid-19 pandemic may be behind us, but pretending that it is over will not make it so. A new Omicron subvariant, BA.2, is driving up coronavirus case counts in Europe and Asia, and experts predict it soon will account for the majority of new cases in the United States. The impact is uncertain. On the one hand, many Americans have already been infected by a similar strain of the virus. On the other hand, BA.2 arrives as people increasingly are resuming prepandemic behaviors, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly one-third of Americans have not completed their initial round of vaccinations, and more than 70 percent have not received booster shots.

In the face of this uncertainty, it would be reckless for the government to reduce its efforts to minimize new cases and help those who fall ill. Yet that is exactly what is happening after Congress recently failed to approve \$15.6 billion for tests, treatments and vaccines.

Denied the funding it needs, the Biden administration is curtailing its efforts to combat the virus. Last week, the administration said that it would reduce the distribution of highly effective monoclonal antibody treatments by more than 30 percent and that it would be forced to end shipments this spring. It also stopped accepting reimbursement claims for Covid-19 tests and treatments from uninsured Americans; vaccine reimbursements will be accepted only through April 5. And the government said that it lacked sufficient funds to place an order for enough doses of vaccines to ensure the availability of booster shots later this year.

OPINION CONVERSATION

Questions surrounding the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, as well as vaccines and treatments.

• Why do some people never get Covid?

Daniela J. Lamas, a pulmonary and critical-care physician, investigates whether genetics are at play.

• Does ending mask mandates make sense?

The epidemiologist Jay K. Varma writes that such decisions "cannot be solely determined by any single metric or combination of them."

- **What's the likely future of Covid?**

Jeffrey Shaman, an infectious disease modeler and epidemiologist, looks at ways in which an endemic Coronavirus might behave.

- **What should have been done earlier in the pandemic?**

Zeynep Tufekci looks back on two years of the pandemic to identify mistakes in the world's response.

Congress must approve more funding immediately. Ensuring that Covid tests, treatments and vaccines remain readily available is the best way to prevent new waves of infections and to preserve the progress so far toward the end of the pandemic.

Failing to maintain adequate public funding means Americans increasingly will have to rely on their own resources. In effect, the United States is reverting to its usual approach to health care: Those with money and insurance will be able to get tests and treatments; those without may not. The price for a dose of monoclonal antibody treatment can approach \$2,000, and even the relatively modest cost of test kits or vaccinations can discourage people from taking the basic steps necessary to protect themselves and others.

A bill to fund the government, which passed this month, initially included \$15.6 billion in Covid aid, which would have provided the administration with much of the \$22.5 billion it has requested. But the funding was stripped because House Democrats were unable to resolve an internal squabble. The bill would have repurposed unused money from earlier rounds of Covid aid, but some Democrats resisted, insisting the government should provide new funding.

To pass a new bill, Democrats will need the support of at least 10 Senate Republicans, and those most amenable want to use money from prior appropriations.

That should not be a deal breaker. States have received more federal aid in the past two years than they know what to do with; some state coffers are overflowing. Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia signed legislation this week that will send up to \$500 to Georgia households to help with the rising cost of food, gas and other essentials. About a dozen other states, including California, are considering similar distributions of surplus cash. But while higher prices are a real challenge for many Americans, policymakers must also remain focused on preventing fresh outbreaks of Covid-19, which could be even more economically painful.

A chunk of the funding requested by the Biden administration, for example, was earmarked to help lower-income countries fight the coronavirus. The United States has a moral obligation to provide this humanitarian aid, and there are diplomatic benefits to helping other nations. In addition, it will help the whole world get closer to the end of the pandemic. Allowing the virus to continue to run rampant in some parts of the world increases the chances that new variants will continue to develop and spread.

It is worth underscoring that much of what the Biden administration is requesting should not require emergency funding. The United States ought to maintain funding for public health, including the resources to monitor infectious diseases and to develop new vaccines and treatments, in the same way that it maintains funding for other forms of national defense. The gaping holes in the nation's public health infrastructure, which the pandemic exposed, were created by exactly the kind of shortsightedness now on display.

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