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More infectious coronavirus strain?

I would have missed the news if it hadn't been for an article in Bloomberg, a business news service, reporting on Malaysians detecting a "virus strain that's 10 times more infectious". He was referring to SARS-Cov2, the virus that causes Covid-19.

The Bloomberg article had a passing reference to the virus strain found in people returning to Malaysia from India and the Philippines. The person returning to Malaysia from India had breached a required 14 day quarantine and was sentenced to five months imprisonment.

A Facebook post by the Malaysian Health Director General, Noor Hisham Abdullah was picked up and featured on Indian TV.

All this outside publicity led me to check the internet where I found a bulletin from our own Philippine Genome Center at the University of the Philippines, which reports having found a G614 (or D614G) strain of SARS-Cov2 among local cases.

The PGC reports that so far this variant has been found only in Quezon City and it is still not clear how widespread it is in the country. The PGC also quotes from two articles in the journal Cell to say that there is "no definitive evidence showing that carriers of the G614 variant are actually more transmissible than those with D614 (the original type), and the mutation does not appear to substantially affect clinical outcomes as well", meaning people infected with G614 do not seem to have more serious Covid-19.

Curiously, this variant was mentioned on a television interview early in July by Dr. Edsel Salvana of the UP National Institute of Molecular Biology who observed the variant might be responsible for the growing number of cases in the Philippines. At that time, the PGC had not come out yet with a report on the variant's presence in the Philippines. Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire picked up Dr. Salvana's comments in a press conference shortly after.

In an August 17 press conference, Dr. Vergeire once again mentioned the variant: "It is said to have a higher possibility of transmission or infectiousness, but we still don't have enough solid evidence to say that will happen." Dr. Vergeire's observation has since been picked up by several international publications.

Benjamin Cowley, head of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of Hong Kong, has also criticized the Malaysian Director General for giving the figure of "ten times more infectious", saying instead: "(It) might be a little bit more contagious. We haven't yet got enough evidence to evaluate that, but there's no evidence that it's a lot more contagious" and that "It's more commonly identified now than it was in the past, which suggests that it might have some kind of competitive advantage over other strains of Covid-19."

But here's a catch: this isn't a new mutation that started in the Philippines or Asia. As Dr. Salvana pointed out in July, the virus is already the predominant strain in US and Europe. Let's hope this will not be called a Philippine or Asian virus, like Trump was initially calling SARS-Cov2 the Chinese virus.

We will just have to be more vigilant in the Philippines. While the disease is not more severe if the infection is from this variant, its ability to spread rapidly is problematic, considering that so much of transmission in the Philippines has been through offices, homes and communities. International health researchers, as well as our own Philippine Genome Center, are also monitoring the variant because of concerns around the development of a Covid-19 vaccine. Currently, influenza vaccines have to be administered every year because they have to be "updated" with new mutant strains. Will this be the case for Covid-19?

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This e-newsletter/blog will appear as needed, calling attention to crucial health issues with information, commentary and analysis, as well as links to additional resources. The newsletter draws on a wide range of publications and media platforms from around the world to help you make informed decisions.

Because of the pandemic, our staff is doing WFH (work from home), out in Pangasinan, Rizal & Metro Manila.
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