



Spreading panic won't stop the spread of COVID, but Merck might

Perhaps the Biden administration should moderate relations between its two squabbling allies.

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At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, I spoke with a number of top epidemiologists about how it was likely to unfold.

There were differences of opinion on how bad it would be. But there was consensus on one point:

The typical virus comes in with a bang and goes out with a whimper.

The science is simple, they said. If a virus kills the host then it stops spreading. But a virus that merely sickens the host has plentiful opportunities to spread.

“I think that is exactly what is happening,” said Dr. Paul Offit when I emailed him. “Time will tell.”

While you're waiting, make sure to get vaccinated. Offit, who is among the top epidemiologists in the country, is one of many physicians who argues that vaccination is the best defense against all variants of COVID including the Omicron variant.

Another is Jeffrey Singer, a senior fellow at the free-market Cato Institute.

“I'm at a loss to understand why there is such a panic,” Singer told me. “We had to know that every few months we'd have a new variant. It's just the natural path of a virus to mutate. Generally speaking, those that are more contagious are less lethal.”

That would seem to include Omicron, which is said to be even more contagious but less deadly than the Delta virus that preceded it. Angelique Coetzee, the chairwoman of the South African Medical Association, had this to say of the variant:

“It presents mild disease with symptoms being sore muscles and tiredness for a day or two not feeling well. There are no prominent symptoms. Of those infected, some are currently being treated at home.”

Singer said this new variant might be a blessing in disguise. Of those who choose not to get vaccinated, this variant could give them immunity without the life-threatening symptoms of the other variants, he said.

Meanwhile my fellow members of the mainstream media are missing the big news about COVID, he said.

That’s happening right here in New Jersey, where Merck Pharmaceuticals has developed the first antiviral to combat COVID.

On Tuesday an FDA advisory panel voted 13-10 to give emergency approval to molnupiravir, the first drug to kill the COVID virus the same way antibiotics kill bacterial disease.

“This is a game changer,” said Singer. “This is something that goes right at the virus replication apparatus and kills it. It’s like a poison to the virus.”

Merck said in a release that it expects to produce 10 million molnupiravir treatments by the end of 2021. But none can be prescribed until the FDA approves the panel’s findings.

Singer accuses the FDA of “dragging its feet.” The British have already approved the Merck drug along with a Pfizer antiviral that may be even more effective, he said .

“I don’t think the British care any less about the welfare of their people than we do,” he said. “The sooner you get this out, the better.”

The new antivirals have been shown to be effective in combating COVID, he said..

“Both were so impressive in clinical trials that they suspended the trials because these things work so well there was no point of continuing,” he said.

The combination of drugs for short-term use and vaccines for long-term use could mean the end of the pandemic, he said.

“If this is available, why are we concentrating on the variants?” he asks.

Former FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb is asking the same question.

On CBS’ “Face the Nation” on Sunday, Gottlieb said, “We’re close to the end of the pandemic” because of the development of vaccines and antivirals.

Gottlieb criticized the decision to ban flights from South Africa, also a sore point with Singer.

Singer pointed out that it was the South Africans who first identified the variant. But as of yesterday it has been found in 20 other countries, including the U.S.

So why is the U.S. banning flights to and from South Africa?

“It does sound like it’s discriminatory,” he said.

Singer said the ban is likely because of misconceptions about that country. It was a South African who pioneered heart transplants, and the country has a highly sophisticated health-care establishment.

“South Africa did the right thing,” Singer said. “They genotyped the variant and their reward is we ban them from coming.”

He added, “Travel bans almost never work because by the time you discover it the horse is out of the barn.”

This horse has already made it as far as California, news reports say.

But that’s no reason to panic over this variant, Singer said.

“I predict in a couple of weeks people will be trying to remember, ‘What was the name of that?’” he said.

By then we may be on to the next letter of the Greek alphabet.

But this time around we’ll have some tools to fight it.