

New COVID variant now in Phl – DOH

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The new and more contagious variant of COVID-19 that first emerged in the United Kingdom has been detected in the Philippines, the Department of Health (DOH) and the Philippine Genome Center (PGC) announced last night.

In a statement, the DOH and PGC said that following strengthened biosurveillance and border control efforts, the B-117 SARSCoV-2 or the UK variant was detected in the Philippines after samples from a Filipino who arrived from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Jan. 7 “yielded positive genome sequencing results.”

The patient is a male resident of Quezon City who departed for Dubai on Dec. 27, 2020 for business purposes. He returned to the Philippines on Jan. 7 via Emirates Flight EK 332. He was swabbed and quarantined in a hotel upon arrival.

“The positive test result was released the following day and the patient was referred to a quarantine facility in Quezon City while his samples were sent to PGC for whole genome sequencing,” the DOH and PGC said.

The patient was accompanied by his female partner during his trip.

However, the woman tested negative for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, upon arrival.

The woman is currently under strict quarantine and monitoring.

“Both of the returning Filipinos had no exposure to a confirmed case prior to their departure to Dubai nor had any travel activities outside Quezon City,” the DOH and PGC said. Immediate contact tracing was done in close coordination with the **Quezon City government**.

Those initially identified as contacts are asymptomatic and currently under strict home quarantine.

The DOH said it continues to work closely with the Quezon City government to ensure timely and effective measures are in place to mitigate transmission.

It secured the flight manifest and initiated contact tracing of other passengers.

The DOH advises those who were aboard Emirates Flight EK 332 to get in touch with their barangay health emergency response teams.

The weekly genomic biosurveillance among incoming passengers, local cases, re-infected patients, and those with reported clustering of cases will be intensified, the DOH said.

The DOH has also coordinated with the Department of the Interior and Local Government for the expansion of contact tracing to include third-generation close contacts for known B-117 cases.

All close contacts of confirmed B-117 cases shall also undergo strict 14-day facility-based quarantine.

The DOH reiterated its call to national government agencies, local government units and the public for stricter observance of the minimum public health standards and stricter implementation of quarantine protocols to further mitigate the risk of acquiring the virus and slow down possible mutations.

QC gov't monitoring first case

The Quezon City government, in coordination with the DOH, is closely monitoring the case of a resident who tested positive for the new COVID-19 variant.

Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte last night said the city epidemiology and disease surveillance unit (CESU) is waiting for the DOH to submit the list of passengers who were on the same flight as the patient to contact trace passengers who may be from the city.

As an added precautionary measure, the patient's immediate household contacts have been brought to an isolation facility where they were also tested, Belmonte said.

CESU also initiated heightened surveillance in the community of the resident to determine the presence of clustered cases, she said.

"We have to remain cautious and vigilant to avert the spread of this new variant. What is important is we take care of the resident, and make sure we don't sow panic in the community," she added.

Belmonte also stressed the need to intensify practicing minimum health standards and to report all COVID symptoms immediately, following the confirmation of the variant in the city.

"We are doing everything we can to trace and isolate, knowing fully well that this variant is more contagious, but not more virulent," CESU head Dr. Rolly Cruz said.