

'Don't take Omicron lightly'

WHO warns mild effects not conclusive, risks include severe illness, death

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THE World Health Organization (WHO) has cautioned against treating the COVID-19 Omicron variant as a mild strain, saying the virus will also cause severe illness and death.

"We know that people infected with Omicron can have the full spectrum of disease, from asymptomatic infection to mild disease, all the way to severe disease to death," Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's COVID-19 technical lead, said at a public forum.

"We do have some deaths associated with Omicron and that's what we expected because omicron will circulate among the different populations," Van Kerkhove said.

She said the same risk factors for severe disease and death apply for the elderly, people with underlying conditions, and those who are unvaccinated.

She also cautioned against dismissing the mild effects of Omicron, because the more it spreads, the greater opportunity the virus has to mutate and infect more people.

"[I]ncreased transmissibility means you're going to have more cases. More cases mean more hospitalizations, which means already overburdened health care systems will continue to be overburdened and some will fail," she said.

"So some people will not get the care that they need because it's two years into a global pandemic and if a system is overburdened, people will die," she added.

The Omicron, a variant of concern, has so far been recorded by at least 77 countries.

Britain on Wednesday recorded a record 78,610 laboratory-confirmed COVID cases, with scientists predicting even higher rates as Omicron is believed to spread much faster than the currently dominant Delta variant.

The Department of Health on Thursday said that the new Omicron variant of COVID-19 infects households more than the Delta variant.

Health Undersecretary Myrna Cabotaje made the statement a day after the DOH confirmed at least two cases of the Omicron variant in the Philippines.

"The Omicron variant targets households more. There are studies showing that 19 percent of households were infected by Omicron as compared with 8.5 percent for Delta," Cabotaje said during a briefing.

"That is why it is important for all the people in the household to get vaccinated because the vaccine provides another layer of protection and it really decreases the COVID-19 infection rate," she added.

Cabotaje said there are also studies in the United Kingdom that show the elderly and the children of the unvaccinated adults appear to be at risk of the Omicron variant.

"Those already covered by the vaccination program should really get vaccinated so as to protect the children who are not yet eligible for vaccination," she added.

The government's COVID-19 vaccination program started last March 1.

However, the vaccination for those aged 12 to 17 and the administration of booster shots only started last month.

More than 42 million Filipinos are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, which is still short of the target of 54 million Filipinos fully vaccinated by the year's end.

The government is implementing a second round of three-day national vaccination event from Dec. 15 to 17 to ramp up its inoculation efforts and is expecting to administer 7 million doses within those three days.

The administration aims to fully vaccinate 77 million people against COVID-19 by March 2022 and 90 million by June 2022.

Cabotaje said almost 65 percent of senior citizens, around 6 million people, and nearly a quarter of minors, or more than 2 million children, are now fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Some 6 million out of 8 million senior citizens or about 75 percent, who are at risk of severe COVID-19, have received at least one vaccine dose.

"The turnout is good among senior citizens who want to get booster shots. We just need to persevere more to vaccinate the rest of the senior citizens," Cabotaje said.

Meanwhile, about 62 percent of children aged 12 to 17 have received at least one COVID-19 shot. Twenty-four percent or 2.7 million have completed two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, Cabotaje said. Also on Wednesday, 3,696,900 doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine arrived at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, representing jabs donated by the German government through the COVAX facility. German Ambassador to the Philippines Anke Reiffenstuel said she looked forward to seeing the scaling up of the Philippines' vaccination drive following her country's vaccine donation.

"I trust that these vaccines will be used in the upcoming [national] vaccination drive, contributing also to the vaccination of minors, which is so necessary in the opening of schools, as well as the boosters for the health care workers and frontliners," said Reiffenstuel following the shipment's arrival at the airport. Assistant Secretary Wilben Mayor, National Task Force against COVID-19 head of strategic communications on current operations, thanked Germany for its vaccine donation, which will provide a major boost to the country's vaccination program.

"We would like to thank the government of Germany for donating these vaccines. This is very timely for us, especially now that we are ramping up the inoculation of our countrymen under phase two of the National Vaccination Days (NVD)," Mayor said.

Mayor encouraged Filipinos to get vaccinated to protect themselves and their loved ones from COVID-19. As of Dec. 15, the Philippines has received a total of 24,261,160 doses of Moderna vaccines. On Tuesday, the Philippines also received 2 million doses of Sinovac vaccines donated by the Chinese government, bringing the total number of China-donated jabs to the country this year to 4 million. Huang Xilian, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines, said the latest vaccine donation from his country is a testament of the strong bilateral ties between China and the Philippines.

The ambassador also reaffirmed the Chinese government's continued support to the Philippines COVID-19 response efforts. In Cabanatuan City, top officials of National Task Force Against COVID-19, the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases, and the WHO visited a temporary treatment and monitoring facility that was converted into a vaccination site.

The facility has 300 rooms equipped with oxygen concentrators and oxygen generators. "What I have seen today in this facility, the TTMF with 300 rooms, the oxygen plant, the expanded cold storage with ultra cold storage facilities. All these demonstrate the leadership and the commitment the city of Cabanatuan has shown in preparing [and] dealing with this pandemic," said WHO representative to the Philippines Dr. Rabindra Abeyasinghe

NTF chief implementer Secretary Carlito Galvez, Jr. commended the local government unit of Cabanatuan for its COVID-19 response and mitigation efforts. Galvez said the NTF gave 25,000 doses of the single-dose Janssen vaccines to Cabanatuan City after it surpassed its committed vaccination target during the first round of the event held from Nov. 29 to Dec. 1. City Health Officer Dr. Armina Adecera said the local government is aiming to vaccinate 20,000 individuals during the second leg of the NVD.

Health Secretary and IATF chairman Francisco Duque III also congratulated the LGU for vaccinating 67 percent of its target population with the first dose, and 55 percent with the second dose.