



THE THREAT IS STILL OUT THERE

Now & Then
BY NADIRA GUNATILLEKE

After several months, COVID-19 deaths in Sri Lanka have dropped to a single digit and the number of COVID-19 cases reported daily has dropped below 500. This is a very significant progress made in the middle of the surging Omicron variant and while some other countries in the world such as China are going for lockdowns once again.

But the topic COVID-19 is discussed here in this column today because the danger is still out there and no country in the world has got rid of this danger completely so far. According to the Epidemiologists, Virologists, medical professionals and health experts, a new variant of COVID-19 can emerge at any moment here in Sri Lanka or in any other country in the world. Already there is a sub-variant of Omicron called AB.2 and a combination Omicron-Delta variant (recombinant) called Deltra-Cron.

It is possible for such a new variant to challenge vaccination and many other victories achieved by Sri Lanka and other countries in the world as billions of people are still unvaccinated around the world. New variants emerge when a viral disease spreads fast within a community. This can happen at any moment.

The Sinhala and Tamil New Year is around the corner and for several months the majority of people in Sri Lanka have been acting as if they have never heard the word 'Corona' and no such disease exists in the world. Some ignorant people turn and look at people who still wear a face shield and move in the society like they had never seen people wearing face shields before. The expression on their faces tells that the people who still follow all health guidelines all the time do something wrong or unnecessary.

Some youths have become idiotically brave to look at people who strictly follow all health guidelines all the time in a funny manner and it is a type of harassment. This is not something surprising because the majority of Sri Lankans are like that. They do not know how to mind their own business like people in other countries but they expect Sri Lanka to become another Singapore.

OMICRON VARIANT

It is hilarious to see how some people act like they live in a jungle located in South Africa while expecting the country and the other people to become New York. After two long years still some people do not wear masks while they move with other people and even when they wear a mask, they wear it below their nose. They do not care about other people's safety at all. They behave as if they have a negative Rapid Antigen Report (RAT) taken only a few minutes ago.

In the past few weeks, many people got infected with the Omicron variant and infected other people around them purposely by not wearing a standard mask properly. Some individuals sneezed and coughed inside crowded air conditioned office rooms even without masks while having fever, cold and all the other symptoms of Omicron. They never went for RATs because they could still breathe and they did not care at all about the safety of the other employees who worked with them.

Administrations have forced employees to work in unhealthy air conditioned environments without letting them open even one window to get some clean air. They did not care whether sick employ-



It is easy to get tested for COVID



Do not wear your mask like this

Deputy Director General of Health Services Dr. Hemantha Herath said, although the number of daily COVID-19 cases is on the decline, a surge in cases could occur at any time if people continued to violate health practices when organising public gatherings. People must be feeling more relaxed and comfortable, as the numbers do not show an alarming situation yet. However, it does not mean that the threat has vanished, he said.

ees work inside departments without masks or not. Actually all they wanted was to ensure that all employees come to work and stay inside departments no matter whether they are sick or whether they are wearing masks. The administrations did not care about whether the employees actually worked or not.

According to the Health Promotion Bureau Director Dr. Ranjith Batuwathudawa, although the number of COVID-19 deaths and COVID -19 cases have dropped, the danger of the disease is still there and a new variant can emerge at any moment. Therefore obtaining the Pfizer booster dose and following health guidelines are essential.

HEALTH GUIDELINES

A new variant of COVID -19 can emerge from Sri Lanka at any moment or it can arrive in Sri Lanka from abroad at any moment and the only protection available against such a threat is obtaining the booster shot as soon as possible and following all health guidelines all the time, he said.

Still only 53 per cent of the targeted group (people over the age of 20) had obtained the booster dose (Pfizer) of the COVID-19 vaccine. This is a dangerous situation. A new and dangerous variant of COVID-19 can appear at any moment because the danger is still out there. The objective of following health

guidelines is preventing the virus entering the body and minimizing the viral load entering into the body, he said.

All people should follow all health guidelines when they walk out from their homes no matter whether they have obtained all three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine or not. They should wear a standard mask properly covering both their nose and mouth. They should wash hands with soap often or use a standard hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available. They should keep at least one metre of distance from another person whenever possible, he stressed.

Medical Technology Services Director and Coordinator in charge of COVID-19 at the Health Ministry Dr. Anver Hamdani told media last week that we are not an alienated nation from the globe and anytime, anything is possible as it is evident with the curbs being imposed by China at present due to the spike in cases which might eventually spawn a new variant.

Though we cannot predict the future in terms of the virus, what should be done is to do our part, which is to comply with all stipulated health practices, in order to prevent ourselves from getting into trouble, he said.

Meanwhile, the Deputy Director General of Health Services Dr. Hemantha Herath said, although the number of daily COVID-19 cases is on the decline, a surge in cases could occur at any time

if people continued to violate health practices when organising public gatherings. People must be feeling more relaxed and comfortable, as the numbers do not show an alarming situation yet. However, it does not mean that the threat has vanished, he said.

However, if they ignore the basic health guidelines, the COVID situation could turn dreadful after the festive season. The people who organise and participate in protests and other public gatherings should be more careful in following the health rules without spurring a spike in COVID cases, he stressed.

The country which reported COVID for the very first time in the world is recording its largest ever case numbers since the start of the pandemic. China recorded nearly 1,500 cases per day last week, according to foreign media, and cases have increased by nearly 400 per cent from the average two weeks ago.

Last week China issued city-wide lockdowns in places in Shenzhen, affecting 12.5 million people, Dongguan (10.5 million), and Langfang (5.5 million), and locked down the whole province of Jilin, affecting 24 million. That is a total of 52.5 million people. In Shanghai, schools have returned to online classes and on Saturday, City officials told residents not to leave unless absolutely necessary meaning tens of millions more were in a quasi-lockdown as well.

What if a strong variant of COVID-19 that does not respond to the vaccination emerges here in Sri Lanka or somewhere else in the world and arrives here in Sri Lanka in the near future? Then what will happen? There are young people above the age of 20 and eligible to obtain the booster dose who did not take it fearing the myths told by their friends and relations or spread on social media. Some of the myths are hilarious. They never care about their aged parents, relatives or any other in the society.

One of the main reasons for the current difficult living conditions here in Sri Lanka was the impact of COVID-19. Nearly 16,500 COVID-19 deaths and over 650,000 cases had been reported from Sri Lanka so far.

There is no assurance at all that a new variant would not emerge. There is no forecast about the capabilities of such a new variant. It can be deadlier and more transmissible than all previous variants. Now we are talking about the deaths of people who are over the age of 60. But something that affects all ages can arrive at any moment. The game is not over yet and it will be over forever only when the world discovers a vaccine similar to Polio, tetanus, etc. for COVID-19 which can be given once or twice to get lifetime protection.

The other way is for COVID-19 to become another endemic flu like the common influenza. Until then we all are at risk. We have to keep it in our minds all the time if we like to move forward without any problems.



Face shields provide an additional layer of protection