
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 13 JULY 2022

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Good morning and thank you for joining us for today's press briefing.

Last week approximately 1.6 million cases of COVID-19 and 4,800 deaths were reported -- a 0.9% decrease in cases overall, and a 3.5% decrease in deaths as compared to the previous week.

At the subregional level, COVID-19 cases increased by 2 percent in South America and by 54.9% in Central America. Cases decreased 5.2% in the Caribbean and 4.5% in North America. COVID-19 deaths increased 14.2% in the South American subregion, while they decreased in the remaining three subregions.

Among 33 countries and territories in the region with available data, COVID-19 hospitalizations increased in 14 of them in the last week, as compared to the previous week.

But a growing proportion of cases are being caused by the Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 sublineages, and this is driving new infections across the Americas. In the United States, BA.4 and BA.5 are now the predominant subvariant strains circulating in the community.

An increasing number of countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean are also reporting these sublineages. Omicron BA.5 has been detected in at least 22 countries and territories and is likely to become predominant in all the subregions during the next weeks.

The emergence of BA.4 and BA.5 is yet another reminder that the virus keeps evolving every time it is transmitted, and that we must remain vigilant. We must also strengthen genomic surveillance, which unfortunately has decreased in recent weeks due to less sampling in most countries and territories.

This virus knows no borders, especially now that international travel has resumed. We must use every tool at our disposal to protect ourselves, particularly those of us most vulnerable to severe disease and death.

This means reintroducing public health measures like masks and social distancing when cases spike. Some countries have already begun to do this.

It also means accelerating our efforts to reach everyone with COVID-19 vaccines, which are estimated to have saved nearly four million lives in our region, according to a recent study. The good news is that the vaccines remain highly effective against either of the Omicron sublineages to prevent severe disease or death.

When we first rolled out COVID-19 vaccines, we did not have enough for all those who needed them. In early 2021, countries were scrambling to secure supplies, focusing on vaccinating the groups at the highest risk for disease and death from COVID-19.

Our region's existing medical manufacturing capacity took time to ramp up fully to meet the growing demand for drugs, diagnostics, and Personal Protective Equipment. Latin America and the Caribbean especially depended on imports of medicines and other health technology.

This manufacturing capacity will continue to be sorely needed in our Region to help deal with COVID and other pathogens.

There are likely to be outbreaks of other diseases that will require us to rapidly develop and deploy new vaccines, diagnostics, and the drugs to fight them.

One such disease is monkeypox. In the Americas, a total of 1,325 cases of monkeypox have been reported since May 10 in 14 countries and territories, with no deaths being reported. This represents 14% of the global monkeypox cases. Overall, 81% of confirmed cases were reported by the United States of America and Canada, with steep increases in cases as well as in Brazil and Peru after mass gatherings.

We have issued public health recommendations on surveillance, diagnosis, clinical care, and vaccination for close contacts of people with confirmed cases of monkeypox. A priority for PAHO has been to train and equip countries with the capacity to laboratory confirm infections. With such confirmatory capacity now in place, we expect to see the detection of additional cases and confirm further spread in the coming weeks.

In the Americas, we must be better prepared for the future.

That is why PAHO, with the support of international donors, and collaborating with countries across the Americas, is working to bolster our capacity to manufacture vaccines and the medical tools that are required.

First, we are focusing on efforts to strengthen Latin America and the Caribbean's research and development capacity, particularly in mRNA vaccine development.

Last year, we launched the Regional Platform to Advance Manufacturing of COVID Vaccines and other Health Technologies.

Through this platform, Sinergium Biotech from Argentina and the Institute of Immunobiology Bio-Manguinhos from Brazil have been identified to join the WHO mRNA vaccine technology transfer network.

Scientists and managers from these companies have joined training sessions at the WHO mRNA training center at Afrigen, in South Africa, and they are receiving ongoing technical assistance to boost their capacity.

As a result, the two companies are already applying these techniques to develop mRNA vaccines in their labs at home.

Second, we need also a strong regional regulatory system, so that we can ensure that new medical tools are safe and effective.

PAHO is rolling out several initiatives to increase the capacity of agencies in the Americas, including a new [regional policy](#) to strengthen national regulatory systems, which will guide countries as they promote innovation and respond to emergencies.

We are also working to strengthen the capacities of public quality control labs in Colombia and El Salvador and establishing reference hubs to assess the quality of PPEs, so that our region can ensure that any PPE we produce can be trusted to protect our health workers and others.

And lastly, we are coordinating across regional and international partners to shape a shared roadmap to improve health technologies production capacity in the Americas.

Building on their established track record, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and several Caribbean countries and territories are applying technology transfer agreements for products that have received emergency authorization for use, setting them up to help each other share manufacturing methods.

PAHO, alongside other partners in Latin America and the Caribbean, are working in partnership with the European Union to strengthen our region's capacity for medical product development.

We are conducting several studies on market dynamics and the innovation ecosystem that will help us understand where our region should invest for years to come.

All these efforts combined have the potential to transform how our region develops and manufactures health products, especially the highly sophisticated tools such as vaccines.

Strengthening our Region's medical production capacity has been on our to-do list since day one, but we cannot build all these systems and infrastructure immediately.

It is time to turn our rhetoric into action, and our commitments into achievements.

Countries, donors, and our regional health R&D community must work together to make sure that our long-term investments will expand the scale of our manufacturing capacity.

PAHO will coordinate and help develop the moving parts in our region to ensure that we make the most of our existing infrastructure, institutions, and potential to build a system that benefits all the Americas.

As we have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, manufacturing capacity alone is not sufficient to guarantee access.

But in our Region's history, we have managed to reach millions more people when we work together.

One example is the Revolving Fund – a pioneer financing and procurement mechanism that was established 40 years ago to ensure that vaccines approved for use and endorsed by WHO could quickly be made available to all countries in the region.

Through the Revolving Fund and in partnership with COVAX, we have delivered more than 147 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines across the Region, including to many middle-income countries that have traditionally been excluded from global financing mechanisms.

Just as we are trying to do with manufacturing capacity, the Revolving Fund shows the impact that we can have when we leverage our history of solidarity and collaboration to address the inequities in our region.

With this same spirit, we can build up our region's medical production capacity even further to save and protect even more lives.