

Oral statement to update on the Omicron variant

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on the Omicron variant and the steps we're taking to keep our country safe.

We've always known that a worrying new variant could be a threat to the progress that we've made as a nation.

We're entering the winter in a strong position, thanks to the decisions we made in the summer and the defences that we have built.

Our vaccination programme has been moving at a blistering pace and this weekend we reached the milestone of 17 million boosters across the UK.

This means that even though cases have been rising, hospital admissions have fallen a further 11% in the past week and deaths have fallen by 17%.

But just as the vaccination programme has shifted the odds in our favour, a worrying new variant has always had the opportunity to shift them back.

Last week I was alerted to what is now known as the Omicron variant, now designated a Variant of Concern by the World Health Organisation.

We're learning more about this new variant all the time.

But the latest indication is that it spreads very rapidly, it may impact the effectiveness of one of our major treatments for COVID-19, Ronapreve, and as the Chief Medical Officer said this weekend, there's a reasonable chance that our current vaccines may be impacted.

I can update the House that there have now been five confirmed cases in England, and also six confirmed cases in Scotland and we expect cases to rise over the coming days.

The new variant has also been spreading across the world.

Confirmed cases have been reported in many countries: including Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal.

In this race between the vaccines and the virus, the new variant may have given the virus extra legs.

So, our strategy is to buy ourselves time and to strengthen our defences while our world-leading scientists learn more about this potential threat.

On Friday, I updated the House about the measures that we've put in place including how within hours, we'd placed six countries in Southern Africa on the travel red list.

Today, Mr Speaker, I'd like to update the House on more balanced and proportionate steps that we're taking.

First, measures at the border, to slow the incursion of the variant from abroad.

On Saturday, in line with the updated advice from the UK Health Security Agency, we acted quickly to add four other countries to the travel red list: Angola, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia.

This means anyone who's not a UK or Irish national, or resident – who's been in any of these countries over the previous 10 days – will be refused entry.

And those who are allowed entry must isolate in a Government-approved facility for 10 days.

Beyond this red list, we're also going further to put in place a proportionate testing regime for arrivals from across the world.

So we'll require anyone who enters the UK to take a PCR test by the end of their second day after they arrive and to self-isolate until they've received a negative result.

The regulations for this have been laid before the House today, and will come into effect at 4am tomorrow.

Second, we've announced measures to slow the spread of the virus here in the UK.

We're making changes to our rules on self-isolation for close contacts in England to reflect the greater threat that may be posed by this new variant.

So close contacts of anyone who tests positive with a suspected case of Omicron must self-isolate for ten days, regardless of whether they have been vaccinated or not.

Face coverings will also be made compulsory in shops and on public transport in England unless an individual has a medical exemption.

The regulations for self-isolation and face coverings have been laid before the House today, and will come into force at 4am tomorrow.

But I can confirm to the House that there will be a debate and votes on these two measures to give the House the opportunity to have its say and to perform valuable scrutiny.

My Right Honourable Friend, the Leader of the House, will be setting out more details shortly and we'll be reviewing all these measures that I've set out today after three weeks to see whether they're still necessary.

Third, Mr Speaker, we're strengthening the defences we've built against the virus.

We're already in a stronger position than we were when we faced the Delta variant.

We have a much greater capacity for testing, an enhanced ability for sequencing and the collective protection that's offered by 114 million jobs in arms and so I would like to update the House on our vaccination programme as well.

Our COVID-19 vaccination programme has been a national success story.

We've delivered more booster doses than anywhere else in Europe and we've given top-up jabs to over one in three people over the age of 18 across the UK.

I'd like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the NHS, the volunteers, the armed forces and everyone else that has been involved in this life-saving work.

Our vaccines remain our best line of defence against this virus, in whatever form it attacks us.

There's a lot we don't know about how our vaccine responds to this new variant.

But although it's possible that they may be less effective, it's highly unlikely they will have no effectiveness at all against serious disease.

So it's really important that we get as many jabs in arms as possible.

Over the next few weeks, we were already planning to do six million booster jabs in England alone, but against this backdrop of this new variant, we want to go further and faster.

So I asked the JCVI, the Government's independent expert advisers on vaccinations, to urgently review how we could expand the programme, and whether we should reduce the gap between second doses and boosters.

The JCVI published its advice in the last hour.

First, it advised that the minimum dose interval for booster jabs should be halved from six months to three months.

Second, that the booster programme should be expanded to include all remaining adults aged 18 and above.

Third, that these boosters should be offered, by age group, in a descending order to protect those who are most vulnerable to the virus.

So, priority will be given to older adults and people over 16 who are at risk.

Fourth, that severely immunosuppressed people aged 16 or above who've received three primary doses should now also be offered a booster dose.

Finally, that children aged between 12 and 15 should be given a second dose, 12 weeks from the first dose.

I have accepted this advice in full.

With this new variant on the offensive, these measures will protect more people more quickly and make us better protected as a nation.

It represents a huge step up for our vaccination programme, almost doubling the number of people who will be able to get a booster dose to protect themselves and their loved ones.

And I know that we're asking more from NHS colleagues who've already given so much throughout this crisis.

But I know that they will be up to the task.

The NHS will be calling people forward at the appropriate time, so that those who are most vulnerable will be prioritised.

And I'll be setting out more details of how we're putting this advice into action in the coming days.

Mr Speaker, our fight against this virus is a global effort, and so I'd also like to update the House on the part that the UK is playing. We currently hold the presidency of the G7.

And earlier today I convened an urgent meeting of the G7 health ministers to co-ordinate the international response.

We were unanimous in our praise for the leadership shown by South Africa, who were so open and transparent about this new variant. And we were resolute in our commitment to working closely with each other, the World Health Organisation and, of course, the wider international community to tackle this common threat.

Mr Speaker, our experience of fighting this virus has shown us that it's best to act decisively and swiftly when we see a potential threat, which is why we're building our defences, and putting these measures in place without delay.

Scientists are working at speed, at home and abroad, to determine whether this variant is more dangerous.

And I can assure the House that if it emerges that this variant is no more dangerous than the Delta variant, then we won't keep measures place for a day longer than is necessary.

COVID-19 is not going away, and so we'll have to keep seeing new variants emerge.

So if we want to live with the virus for the long-term we must follow the evidence and act in a proportionate and responsible way if a variant has the

potential to thwart our progress.

And as we do this, we are taking a well-rounded view, looking not just the impact of these measures on the virus, but the impact to the economy, education, and non-COVID health, such as mental health.

And I'm confident that these responses that we set out today are balanced and responsible steps that are proportionate to the threat we face.

Mr Speaker, this year, our nation has come so far down our road of recovery, but we always knew that there'd be bumps in the road.

But this is not a time to waver.

It's a time to be vigilant and to think about what each and every one of us can do to slow the spread of this new variant.

Getting a jab when the time comes, following the rules that we've put in place and getting rapid, regular tests.

If we all come together once again, then we can keep this virus at bay and protect the progress that we have made.

I commend this statement to the House.