

IS THE OMICRON VARIANT REALLY SO TERRIBLE?

Unfortunately, this editorial is once again inspired by the current COVID pandemic, but now I finally see the full picture from a more optimistic perspective.

I wish to share some reflections on the new “South-African” Omicron variant, which is gradually taking over from the terrible Delta variant. There is as yet very little scientific evidence on this new variant, but most scientists agree on the following two points: 1) the new variant is far more transmissible, and 2) it appears milder in clinical terms. There is also a third point: in many Western countries 80% to 90% of the population has been partially or fully vaccinated against the original variant of COVID-19. While the collapsing testing system reveals that many people who have been vaccinated or have previously recovered from the disease are getting reinfected by the Omicron variant, it is also true that, proportionally speaking, fewer people are dying or ending up in intensive care.

If this information proves correct, how should we act? Undoubtedly, we should continue the global vaccination plan, but is it really wise to try to put up barriers to delay the Omicron variant, letting the Delta variant finish its job? In other words, would you prefer to be infected by a less transmissible variant which has a good chance of killing you or ruining your lungs for the rest of your life, or you would rather be infected by a highly transmissible form which is milder, associated with faster recovery and less likely to kill you? Well, I do know not what the majority think, but I would definitely opt for the Omicron variant.

So, my question is: why are we trying to delay it, instead of letting nature take its course? In Darwinian terms, the disease mutated, and mutated in a way favourable to its survival and transmission, decreasing the chance to kill the host. It has become less perilous, and in turn we should allow its course in order to reach herd immunity. From this perspective, does this huge attempted campaign of contact tracing, mass screening, and quarantine of people who may or may not be infected make sense, or are we just punishing ourselves and needlessly ruining the economy? Would the problem instead be fully resolved by a more permissive strategy? It would be nice to think so, but we still have to consider two relevant groups of people in the equation: the immunocompromised, who remain at risk until the pandemic is over and may have to be protected by isolation, and the anti-vaxxers, who may have to face the consequences of their own decisions. A final point to consider is the more the virus multiplies, the greater the chance of new variants whose characteristics cannot be predicted in any way.

That being said, the outlook does seem brighter, so let's cross our fingers and look forward to a considerably better 2022!

Happy New Year,

Marco