

Experts urge caution on Omicron variant

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Allowing the omicron variant to run its course in the community in the expectation that it will prove to be less virulent than delta would be a serious mistake, Burnet Institute Deputy Director, Associate Professor David Anderson has warned.

"That is wishful thinking of the highest order, a terrible, terrible idea,"

Associate Professor Anderson told ABC Radio's PM program. "There is absolutely no evidence that it's less virulent.

"There's not the evolutionary pressure there would be with flu, for example. Flus do tend over time to eventually get less virulent, but we're not seeing that yet, and it could take decades. We're just not that lucky, I don't think."

Burnet Honorary Principal Research Fellow Professor Mike Toole told PM that the emergence of omicron comes as no surprise.

"We knew this was coming, all of this was so predictable," Professor Toole said. "All viruses mutate."

Professor Toole said the only absolute known about omicron at the moment is the number of mutations on the surface spike protein—32.

"That's more than double or triple the number for Delta, and it includes a lot of mutations that were on other variants, but we've never seen them all together on one virus, so we don't really know the overall impact that will have."

Professor Toole said it's too early to say whether omicron is less severe than delta.

"We have clear data from South Africa, from the Ministry of Health that the number of new hospital admissions for COVID has tripled in two weeks," he said.

"That's just in the Gauteng Province, which is where this variant has been circulating that includes Johannesburg and Pretoria."

Associate Professor Anderson believes Australia needs to maintain a

vaccines-plus strategy, which includes a focus on safe indoor air ventilation, the use of respirators and masks, and the reinstatement of broad quarantine controls.

"Selective border controls are not the way to go," he said. "Same mistake we made with China in early 2020. We can't let it rip and then think, 'Oh that was a mistake.' We need people to just be careful and take that [precautionary principle](#) so that we don't give up the hard-won gains."

Provided by Burnet Institute

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