

Scientist behind UK vaccine says next pandemic may be worse

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Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert on June 11, 2021. In excerpts released ahead of a speech Monday Dec. 6, 2021, Prof. Sarah Gilbert, one of the scientists behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, is warning that the next pandemic may more contagious and more lethal unless more money is devoted to research

and preparations to fight emerging viral threats. Credit: Steve Parsons/PA via AP, file

One of the scientists behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine is warning that the next pandemic may be more contagious and more lethal unless more money is devoted to research and preparations to fight emerging viral threats.

In excerpts released before a speech Monday, Professor Sarah Gilbert says the scientific advances made in fighting deadly viruses "must not be lost" because of the cost of fighting the current pandemic.

"This will not be the last time a virus threatens our lives and our livelihoods," Gilbert is expected to say. "The truth is, the next one could be worse. It could be more contagious, or more lethal, or both."

Gilbert will be speaking Monday night when she delivers this year's Richard Dimbleby lecture, named after the late broadcaster who was the BBC's first war correspondent and a pioneer of television news in Britain. The annual televised lecture features addresses by influential figures in business, science and government.

Gilbert is set to urge governments to redouble their commitment to scientific research and pandemic preparedness, even after the threat of COVID-19 wanes.

"We cannot allow a situation where we have gone through all we have gone through, and then find that the enormous economic losses we have sustained mean that there is still no funding for pandemic preparedness," she said. "The advances we have made, and the knowledge we have gained, must not be lost."

The U.K. lifted most coronavirus restrictions in July after a successful vaccination campaign, but is now waiting to see whether the new omicron variant will cause a setback. It has seen a high number of new daily infections this fall and still has the second-worst COVID-19 death toll in Europe—over 146,000 deaths—after Russia.

The government has tightened travel testing and isolation requirements and barred visitors from South Africa, where the variant was first identified, and several other African countries including Nigeria.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Monday more than 300 omicron cases had been confirmed in Britain, some with no links to international travel, and "we can conclude that there is now community transmission across multiple regions of England."

Much remains unknown about the variant, including whether it is more contagious as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart vaccines.

"We can't say for certain at this point whether omicron has the potential to knock us off our road to recovery," Javid said.

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