Are we on the brink of a third wave of COVID?

Here in the UK, we are waiting patiently for the government to lift all COVID-19 restrictions on June 21, as it has promised to do. UK businesses are urging the government to stick to its promise.

The thought of ongoing restrictions is difficult for all of us – every doctor knows the harms that lockdowns bring to their patients. People are clearly feeling increasingly angry about the prospect of a lingering lockdown; there have been large protests against lockdowns in many countries, with fringe groups continuing to claim the virus itself does not exist. When healthcare professionals see these protests and false claims, though, it rubs salt into very recent wounds. We have been working tirelessly and risking our own lives caring for our patients with the virus. Each protest feels like a slap in the face for all the work we have done so far.

So, despite the fact that the numbers of hospitalisations from COVID are at a low in the UK and our vaccine programme has been a runaway success, scientists and doctors would prefer that the government wait another month to lift restrictions until more people have received both doses of the vaccine, which has been shown to offer a good level of protection against the delta variant.

The cause for their concern is a rise in the number of new cases of the B1.617.2 – or the variant first identified in India, now being called the "delta variant", which can increase the risk of hospitalisation by 2.7 times, according to Public Health England. The UK government has already come under fire for not acting quickly enough to restrict flights from India and it is dithering about what to do next.

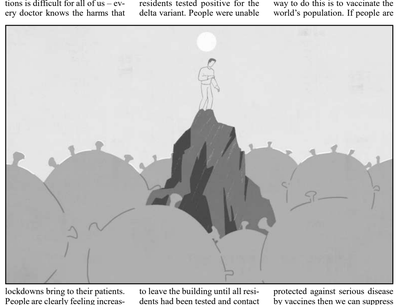
As a doctor, it is painful to watch. The one thing we should have learned since this pandemic began is that any delay in responding to this virus results in more deaths and longer and harder lockdowns.

Over-reacting, earlier, saves time and lives in the long term; we only need to look at New Zealand for the evidence. Under-reacting, and taking too long to make a decision, risks another serious outbreak of the virus.

Evidence that we are on the verge of a third wave, not just in the UK but globally, is mounting. Since March, large parts of Europe have been racing to vaccinate their populations against rising numbers of infections, mainly thought to be due to the variant first discovered in the UK, B1.117, now known as the "alpha variant".

Hampered by delays to the delivery of vaccines, Germany and Italy have seen cases surge and lockdown rules extended. These countries are now worried about rising numbers of cases of the delta variant in the UK, with Germany banning all but essential travel to and from the UK as of May 23 as it brands the UK an "area of variant concern".

This comes after 189 people were quarantined in an apartment block in the German town of Velbert on May 18 after one of its residents tested positive for the delta variant. People were unable to leave the building until all residents had been tested and contact tracing was complete.



Aside from Germany and the UK, the delta strain has been detected in other European nations including Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and Spain – albeit at low levels.

Elsewhere, Nepal continues to struggle against a rising wave of infections, with hospitals finding it difficult to meet the demand from increasing numbers of patients. Nepal's prime minister, KP Sharma Oli, has made an urgent plea for vaccines to his UK counterpart Boris Johnson. Speaking to the BBC, he said the UK should acknowledge the sacrifices of Nepal's Gurkha soldiers who served the UK and make Nepal a priority for UK COVID aid.

There have also been reports of a new variant being discovered in Nepal, although the World Health Organisation (WHO) tweeted: "WHO is not aware of any new variant of SARS-CoV-2 being detected in Nepal." If there is a new variant, it is likely to be a mutated version of the delta variant.

Scientists are still studying this potential variant, but it is thought to harbour the K417N mutation which could make it more evasive to the immune response triggered by the vaccines. If that is the case, it could be potentially problematic as it has been identified in Vietnam, Japan, the UK and Portugal as well as other countries.

South Africa is already taking action to prevent a third wave. President Cyril Ramaphosa has imposed tighter restrictions across four of the country's nine provinces. With almost 1.65 million cases and 56,363 fatalities, South Africa is officially the worst-affected country on the continent.

Ramaphosa has repeatedly criticised richer countries for hoarding vaccines by buying them up too quickly, leaving the African continent with less than 2 percent of its population vaccinated so far. South Africa is also calling for an end to patent rights on the coronavirus vaccines so it can manufacture its own supplies and administer them.

It is a worrying time for many people involved in the fight to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in preventing the spread of new variants and racing to get as many people fully vaccinated as possible.

But while countries continue to look inwards and protect only their own populations, this virus is likely to find fertile breeding grounds in countries that are unable to vaccinate their people at the same rates, resulting in further variants arising. We need to break the chain between infections and hospital admissions, and the only way to do this is to vaccinate the world's population. If people are protected against serious disease by vaccines then we can suppress and then live alongside the virus with regular booster shots for future variants. If countries continue to be nationalistic about vaccines, a third wave is looking more and more likely.

We live in a world where people can move relatively easily from continent to continent, so while vaccinating your own country might buy time, we need to vaccinate globally to solve this pandemic.

The theory – until now widely dismissed as a conspiracy theory – that the coronavirus was manmade in a laboratory in Wuhan has recently started to circulate again.

The Wall Street Journal reported on May 23 that three researchers in China's Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick enough to warrant hospital treatment in November 2019, before the outbreak in Wuhan officially began. The Wuhan Institute leads studies into coronaviruses as well as other pathogens, and the researchers allegedly showed symptoms that may have been consistent with COVID-19. The question as to whether the symptoms were COVID remains unanswered.

Four days after this report appeared, however, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in the US released a press statement saying: "The US Intelligence Community does not know exactly where, when, or how the COVID-19 virus was transmitted initially but has coalesced around two likely scenarios: either it emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals or it was a laboratory accident."

The ONDI said it is divided over which one of these cases is more likely, and it will continue to examine all available evidence. President Joe Biden ordered his intelligence committees to investigate the possibility of a laboratory leak, something China has firmly rejected.

Does it matter where the virus sprang from? Well, yes, it does. It is vital that we understand the origins of this virus so we can prevent similar pandemics from occurring in the future.

An investigation team sent in January this year by the WHO to examine the possible causes of the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan concluded it was "extremely unlikely" the virus had escaped from a nearby laboratory. The US has asked the WHO for more data and transparency as it moves into Phase Two of its COVID origins study.

The widely accepted theory about the origins of the coronavirus is that it was zoonotic, meaning it jumped from animals to humans; the most likely animal coming into contact with a human being either a bat or a pangolin. The theory that it was man-made in a laboratory in China has always been dismissed by many scientists as a conspiracy theory but, since President Biden's announcement, it has now gathered mainstream interest. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told a Canadian press conference on May 27 that he supports Biden's efforts to investigate the origins of the coronavirus.

USAF prepares for 'Over the Horizon' operations after Afghanistan withdrawal

From P1

2021 enacted amount. The service, in budget documents, said it is "taking risk in enduring missions, reducing the request amount to align with current assumptions."

Unlike prior years, the 2022 budget eliminates the "overseas contingency operations" funds, pulling much of that money into the Pentagon's $715 billion base budget.

Some areas, according to budget documents, where the Air Force is drawing down its spending, include: A decrease in flying hours, funding just 160,613 total force flying hours in its direct war and enduring costs budget, down from 200,866 in the 2021 enacted budget.

A decrease in the number of Total Force Airmen supporting contingency operations from 22,779 in the 2021 budget to 19,889 in the 2022 request. Some costs are growing, however.

The US Air Force is requesting $154.52 million for primary combat forces funding for Operation Freedom's Sentinel in Afghanistan, up from $108.84 million in 2021 as strike aircraft face longer missions. Continued operations will focus largely on locations such as Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, which is hosting B-52 bombers for long-distance strike operations in Afghanistan.

On June 8, CENTCOM announced that more than 50 percent of the entire retrograde process has been completed, with about 500 C-17 loads of material flown out of the country.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., appearing alongside Roth in the hearing, said the current capabilities in use in CENTCOM will largely remain in the Air Force in 2022, though he acknowledged the service's priorities are shifting.

"I will tell you we are also making a transition to the future," Brown said. "So, small levels of that divestment as we start to look towards the future, maintaining the capability that we've been using today, at the same time looking forward [to that] capability that will ensure that we are able to be connected, and be persistent, and be supportable, not only in a permission environment, but in a highly contested environment as well."

The Kabul Times

The keeper of Afghanistan's poetic past

By Lynzy Billing

(Part I)

On a crisp March morning in 2020, gridlocked cars honk noisily at a roundabout opposite a high wall, guarded by a handful of uniformed men in the Afghan capital. Behind the wall lies Kabul Public Library, a simple, three-storey brick structure constructed 55 years ago. Trapped between imposing government buildings, the library is an oasis in the chaotic capital – its corridors, run-down and dimly lit, lie silent, but for the faint chattering of guards drinking tea outside.

"Afghan poetry is both subtle and profound, hinting at notions of spiritualism, and an Afghan sense of the transcendental," muses 81-year-old poet Ghulam Haidar Haidari Wujodi as he hunches over his desk nestled between teetering towers of books on the library's top floor.

There is a hole the size of a quarter in the large window just above the small red hat balanced on Wujodi's head, cracks extending, spider-like, from its circumference – the result of a steel ball bearing from a nearby car bomb the year before. It's a jarring reminder of the realities of Kabul, and strangely at odds with the room's otherwise serene atmosphere. Beyond the cracked glass, the city hums.

Wujodi was born in Panjshir province, in the northeastern part of the country, but he moved to Kabul as a young man with big dreams of becoming a published poet.

He joined the Association of Poets, which was established by its members – scholars, playwrights, teachers and poets from across the country – in 1965. They would come together for readings and to share their work and resources with one another.

It was a space packed with passion and hope, says Wujodi. "There was just this kind of energy that we all got from one another and gave to one another."

The poets had never received that kind of support or experienced that sense of camaraderie before, he explains.

Along with three fellow members of the association, he went on to establish the Kabul Public Library in 1966. It is the only state-owned public library in Kabul and the oldest of the handful of public libraries in Afghanistan.

At first, Wujodi worked as a library clerk – shelving and cataloguing the books, magazines and newspapers using a manual catalogue card system. Then he took charge of the periodicals section, organising them by date and subject.

Wujodi retired a few years ago but continues to show up every day at the library which has become his home as much as he has become the library's. He is often the first to arrive each morning, just beating the early morning rush-hour traffic, and always the last to leave as dusk falls on the capital. He now dedicates his time to eager high school and university students seeking a helping hand as they look for material for their thesis and research assignments in a country where education resources remain scarce – although his desk is open to anyone looking for advice, references or just a debate over some tea.

"We don't have many libraries in Afghanistan or resources to preserve books properly," he says, stroking his white beard and pausing as if deep in thought. "But if we want to know our world better and gain knowledge about all nations, cultures, politics and history you have to study and libraries are key to gaining this knowledge – this is why I value this library and why it means so much to me." He nods in agreement with himself as he speaks. "Our library is small and old but we tried our hardest to build a collection and I am proud of it."

In the world of art and culture, Wujodi is both well known and well respected for his writing and poetry. His work includes mystical Sufi teachings, but he has also tackled taboo subjects, writing about lust and love outside of marriage. While many of these works were not included in his 15 published books, he says his risque approach has been commended by his peers.

When the first public library was established in Afghanistan in 1924, it was with the purpose of preserving sacred religious texts. But during the 1930s, under the rule of a new king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, and during a period of relative stability, the idea of libraries as a source of public knowledge and information took root.

But in 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul city and decreed that all printed material with pictures or paintings of living creatures were non-Islamic and should be burned. They destroyed books in libraries across the country, including the National Library in Kabul and the Library of Kabul University. According to one report, 15 out of the 18 libraries in Kabul were closed during the rule of the Taliban (1996-2001). In some cities, all of the library books were destroyed – 80,000 books are thought to have been lost during that time.

Wujodi says that when the Taliban came to Kabul Public Library, the head of the library convinced them to leave without burning the books.

Today, the library hosts a collection of thousands of books and magazines donated by international donors and publishers. There are novels, history books, texts on social sciences and interpretations of the Quran. There is a section for children's books and books in other languages, including Russian and French. In comparison to most Afghan libraries, which have just a few hundred books, Wujodi says it may be the most varied collection of books in the country.

But its most impressive sections, and Wujodi's favourites, are the "literature section" with thousands of poetry books, and the "newspaper section", where salvaged newspaper clippings from as early as the 1920s are lovingly bound together, carefully stored on shelves lining every wall.

Though outdated, the library today offers a crucial archive of the country's history as recorded by the Afghan press. It is one in which many are illiterate and have had no access to an education.

In Afghanistan, 3.7 million children are out of school – 60 percent of them girls, according to UNICEF. In the hardest-to-reach areas, and conflict zones, around 85 percent of out-of-school children are female. Attempts by the international community to increase literacy and education in the country have not included the renovation and upgrading of public libraries and their collections. Wujodi and the librarians at Kabul Public Library met with government officials to ask for a budget for renovations and new books and resource materials but he says no support, financial or otherwise, has been offered.

The library has few books on the subjects that many of its visiting students are studying, such as business, management or economy. In a building where there is no heating or air conditioning, and the windows and doors are not insulated, most of the books have been damaged by the hot summers and harsh winters, while others sit covered in a slick of dust, untouched.

"We have around 70,000 books but they are outdated and there is no budget for new books," Wujodi laments. "We have no books on the country's modern history and culture. Our books of geography are outdated and useless," he adds, pulling some from the shelves and flipping through them. And so, as the old library stays standing, its shabby and simple exterior unimpressive at a glance, it has taken on a new role – as a meeting point for a variety of intellectually hungry Afghans, from different backgrounds and of different ages, to share in each others' knowledge through exchanges of Sufi poetry and readings. Sufism is a mystical form of Islam, which has been part of Afghanistan's fabric for almost as long as Islam itself. Many Afghans respect Sufis for their learning and believe they possess "karamat" – a spiritual power that enables Sufi elders to perform acts of generosity and bestow blessings.

To be continued