

Health Experts Say Panic Over New Omicron Variant Unwarranted

Nations around the world are beginning to close their borders over concern about a new variant of COVID-19 called Omicron that has emerged from Southern Africa.

The World Health Organization calls Omicron “a variant of concern,” but admits more needs to be learned about it.

Initial reports describe it as having very mild symptoms.

But the virus may also be highly transmissible. Two new cases have just been confirmed in Canada, the first known to have reached North America.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University’s School of Public Health, said preliminary evidence shows that it is more transmissible. “We don’t know for sure. We really have no data on severity, whether it’s more severe, milder, or more significant,” Jha said.

The United States has decided to ban travelers from South Africa and seven other countries in the region.

Israel has closed its borders to noncitizens for two weeks and has authorized cell phone surveillance of anyone confirmed to be carrying the variant.

Japan also suspended entry to foreign visitors.

But the head of the South African Medical Association, Dr. Angelique Coetzee, said Western nations are panicking unnecessarily.

“There’s body aches and pain with a bit of a headache, not

really sore throat, more of a scratchy type of description and no cough and no loss of smell or taste. And that's what I call 'mild symptoms.'"

South Africa's Health Minister, Joe Phaala, slammed what he called the "draconian" travel bans.

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