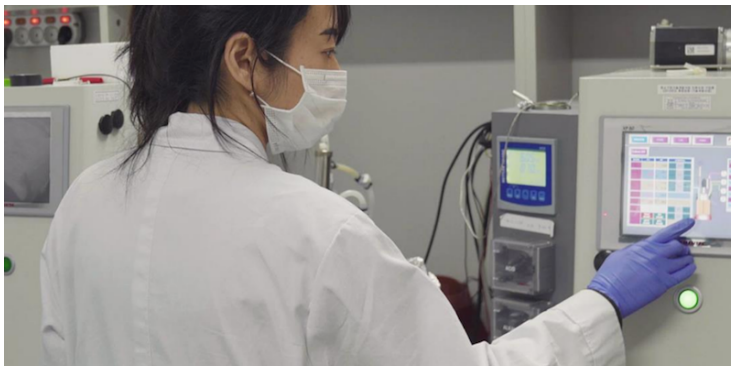
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WHO to expand monitoring of emerging variants of SARS-CoV-2

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A day-long virtual meeting of scientists from around the globe, convened by WHO, brought together more than 1750 experts from 124 countries to discuss critical knowledge gaps and research priorities for emerging variants of the virus



Global scientists are intensifying research into COVID-19, as the World Health Organization (WHO) moves to expand its scientific collaboration and monitoring of emerging variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

A day-long virtual meeting of scientists from around the globe, convened by WHO, brought together more than 1750 experts from 124 countries to discuss critical knowledge gaps and research priorities for emerging variants of the virus.

The consultation was structured around six thematic areas covering epidemiology and mathematical modelling, evolutionary biology, animal models, assays and diagnostics, clinical management and therapeutics and vaccines.

There was a consensus on the importance of integrating the new SARS-CoV-2 variants research into the global research and innovation agenda while enhancing coordination across disciplines.

“Our collective goal is to get ahead of the game and have a global mechanism to quickly identify and study variants of concern and understand their implications for disease control efforts,” said Dr Ana Maria Henao Restrepo, Head, R&D Blueprint, WHO.

It is normal for viruses to mutate, but the more the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads, the more opportunities it has to change. High levels of transmission mean that we should expect more variants to emerge.

“So far an astounding 350000 sequences have been publicly shared, but most come from just a handful of countries. Improving the geographic coverage of sequencing is critical for the world to have eyes and ears on changes to the virus,” said Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, Technical Lead on COVID-19, WHO.

Scientists highlighted the importance of national data platforms to document critical clinical, epidemiological and virus data that facilitates the detection and assessment of new SARS-CoV-2 variants.