

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 28TH NOVEMBER, 2021

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((Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: In America work has already started on a new booster vaccine for Omicron and it's being led by Doctor Paul Burton who's the Medical Director of Moderna and he joins me now from New Jersey. Paul, welcome.

Can I start by asking you what you know now about this new variant, Omicron?

A: I think, Andrew, to be honest at the minute we're still really trying to work out what is going on with this variant. I would say there's three very important questions. The first is, is it more transmissible? The second is just how severe will the disease be that it can cause? And the third is, will we be able to neutralise it and control it and contain it with the current vaccines? I think the answer to that third question we should know in a couple of weeks from laboratory experiments but is it more transmissible and is it more severe, that's going to take a little longer for us to work out.

AM: But your suspicion, looking at what you know about it at the moment, is that it will escape the current vaccines?

A: Yes. These mutations, at least 30 of them in the spike protein alone, nine of them known to be associated with immune escape, another 11 predicted to be associated with immune escape. You bring those together I think this is a very concerning virus.

AM: So do you think that means at the moment if we are double or triple vaccinated we've got no protection or we've got some protection?

A: Well, that's a good question. I think it depends a little bit on how far out you are from either your initial vaccination or having had a booster. We'll have to get the laboratory results, which as I

say should be in in a couple of weeks. We've been able to test a high dose booster of the Moderna vaccine at a hundred micrograms and a lower dose, a 50 microgram booster, so I think we should get some information from that, how effective are the boosting shots.

AM: Paul, you mentioned a little while ago that the unknown when it comes to severe disease basically how ill will this make us? Now we're being encouraged not to be too worried by people from South Africa who say the symptoms so far are relatively mild. But I guess the problem there is that in South Africa the population is very young, there are relatively few older and more vulnerable people to be infected.

A: Yes, I think that's right, Andrew. You know I think we have cause to be hopeful. We've learnt a lot about this virus in general. We've learnt so much about how to deal with Covid as well through simple measures and obviously through vaccines, but until we see how this virus now behaves in populations of older people, people with other co-morbidities, we really will not get a handle on exactly how severe the disease could be I think.

AM: Now Paul, you're already working on a booster against Omicron which is quite remarkable. Can I ask when you started to work on this and what your time line is for it?

A: Yes, so it's been the Thanksgiving holiday here in the United States and we're a US based company. We've mobilised hundreds of people here in the US and around the world. We started that really early on Thursday, on Thanksgiving day. We should know about the ability of the current vaccine to provide protection in the next couple of weeks, but the remarkable thing about the MRA vaccines, Moderna platform is that we can move very fast.

AM: Lots of people will be imagining you and your colleagues putting the Thanksgiving turkey to one side, going back to work at short notice to do this and then will be asking themselves, okay, if

we need it when will we get the new Omicron vaccine from Moderna into our arms? How soon might it be available?

A: If we have to make a brand new vaccine I think that's going to be early 2022 before that's really going to be available in large quantities.

AM: Finally, we heard from Dr Coetzee in South Africa who said that we should not be too alarmed about this new variant. What's your own personal view?

A: Look, I think you know we've learnt so much about the Coronavirus and Covid over the last two years. We have very effective vaccines. I think the message now is if people are on the fence and you haven't been vaccinated get vaccinated. If you're eligible and I believe in the UK over 40 year olds are eligible for one of the vaccines and you can mix the boosters as well, get boosted. I think we have some experiments that need to get done. This is a dangerous looking virus, but I think we have many tools in our armamentarium now to be able to fight it so I'm optimistic.

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