

The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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CC: Sajid Javid, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Liz Truss, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Secretary of State for International Trade
Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Dear Prime Minister,

We write to you as scientists, academics, and public health experts concerned about the emergence of the Omicron variant and the threat that future variants may pose to public health, the NHS, and the UK's vaccination programme.

Vaccinating the vast majority of the world's population is the best way to prevent SARS-CoV-2 from mutating. However, as the UK has provided booster doses to up to one million people every day, more than 3 billion people across the world have yet to receive their first dose. More boosters have been delivered in rich countries than the total number of all doses administered so far in poorer nations.

Allowing huge numbers of people in low- and middle-income countries to remain unvaccinated is a reckless approach to public health that creates conditions where new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern are more likely to develop. Indeed, the Omicron variant was first identified in Botswana and South Africa, on a continent in which fewer than one in ten are fully vaccinated.

Thanks to remarkable scientific innovations, we have a number of vaccines that remain highly effective against all known Covid-19 variants. Yet, unless we share this technology with the world and increase global vaccination coverage, vaccines will not be effective at stopping new variants of concern. We must use and expand domestic vaccine manufacturing and distribution capacity within low and middle-income countries. However, intellectual property rules and trade secrets remain a major barrier to this task.

We call on the UK government to support the temporary waiver of intellectual property rules under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement for Covid-19 vaccines, tests, and treatments at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to scale up and diversify production of the tools needed to end this pandemic.

We also call on the British government to use all means at its disposal to pressure pharmaceutical companies to share their technology and know-how with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Covid-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) and its mRNA technology transfer hub in South Africa. This way, we can accelerate production and supply in low and middle-income countries and prevent further variants of concern from emerging.

The crisis posed by the Omicron variant is a stark warning of the dangers posed by global vaccine inequality. The pandemic does not stop at the UK border. Ensuring global vaccination coverage will help to prevent unnecessary loss of life and avert further variants of concern from emerging, including variants that could potentially render existing vaccines less effective, or variants that confer greater transmissibility or virulence. We urge you to put public health before the commercial interests of the pharmaceutical industry to prevent another year of uncertainty and tragedy.

Signed,

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