

Q&A

‘We will see an end to this pandemic ... Vaccines, drugs, and behavioural factors will help us’

*In December, the central government set up Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics (INSACOG), a grouping of 10 national laboratories. The underlying aim is to have INSACOG carry out the genomic sequencing of circulating Covid-19 viruses and complement it by correlating epidemiological trends with genomic variants. A quantitative sense of the relevance of INSACOG’s work can be gauged by available data which shows that in its first three months, it detected 771 variants of concern in 10,787 positive samples shared by states. **Rakesh Mishra**, a member of INSACOG who recently retired as the director of Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) and continues to be an adviser to the institute, spoke to **Manka Behl** about what lies ahead:*

Has the extent of different mutants of virus been established in the current outbreak?

Yes. With the genome survey, we can estimate the proportion of different variants in different parts of the country. But this is very dynamic and can alter significantly in couple of weeks. That is why we have been stressing that constant monitoring is essential.

What is the primary reason behind the second wave being so widespread and devastating?

While faster spreading or more infectious variants are one of the factors, human behaviour is the most crucial one. No variant can expand its footprint without exploiting the lack of Covid-appropriate behaviour.

Compared to other countries, why is the mortality rate and number of cases on the higher side in India?

Generally, mortality rate in the country has been lower. But this time, due to excessive stress on the healthcare system, I think we may see more mortality.

Where did the government go wrong in preparing for the second wave?

Any form of clustering promotes this virus, political rallies, religious gatherings, marriage functions, local elections, classrooms, cinema halls, restaurants, bars and much more. Where we went wrong is that we missed controlling these. And the more efficient variants got advantage of that.

Does the virus behaviour change for different age groups? Also, does it change by mutation to mutation?

Yes, but mainly because the immune system is differently efficient. And yes, mutations change the property of the virus.

Will those who get infected now and survive the experience be immune against latest variants?

Yes, at least for the current variants. But it is advisable for such people to also take a vaccine.

Has the efficacy of currently available vaccines been tested against newer variants?

The efficacy of vaccines has been tested and it looks like we are okay with that, especially the two vaccines that are in use in India.

Did we start the vaccination programme at the right time?

Yes, it started as early as it was possible. It was a correct decision to give emergency usage approval.

How many people in India need to be vaccinated so that there is

herd immunity?

The figure is believed to be about 50-60% of the population getting vaccinated. This may give significant advantage in getting out of the pandemic.

Despite increasing cases and deaths, people are still hesitant to get vaccinated? Why is there hesitancy?

Vaccines are safe, effective and have already saved a large number of lives. Not taking a vaccine is not only detrimental to the individuals but also to the people in proximity.

Is a third wave inevitable?

A third wave is certain but we can handle it better with vaccines, new drugs that are likely to enter in few months and better social response. With concerted effort, we can make the third wave much less significant.

Given the rise of mutants in different parts of the world, will there ever be an end to this pandemic?

Yes, we will see an end to this pandemic. Vaccines, drugs and behavioural factors will help us. It is also likely that the milder versions of the virus may enter the field.

Recently, there were reports of eight Asiatic lions testing positive in Hyderabad. Did this transmission occur via humans?

It is most likely to have come from humans or it could be through meat/food.

What are your views on the N440K strain? Is it more deadly and virulent?

No. Also, it is now vanishing gradually and may disappear in a few weeks.

