Transcript Details
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Tracking COVID-19 Variants: A Look at Global Surveillance Efforts

Announcer:
Welcome to *Clinician's Roundtable* on ReachMD. On this episode, we'll hear from Dr. Nahid Bhadelia, who's an Associate Professor at the Boston University School of Medicine and the Founding Director of the Boston University Center on Emerging Infectious Diseases. She'll be discussing current COVID-19 variants. Here's Dr. Bhadelia now.

Dr. Bhadelia:
As of early 2025, many of the COVID variants we're seeing globally are still descendants of the Omicron lineage, which we've seen before, that folks are familiar with, and the most prominent ones of those are LP8.1 or XEC. Many of these are what are usually called the FLiRT variants from 2023, 2024. And there's another one called the Nimbus variant that's particularly been seen in Asia. Overall, the difference that we're seeing is that, in some settings, we've seen a surge in cases in parts of Asian countries, where there's been a question about whether that's related to an increasing transmissibility of the new variants versus declining immunity in their population. And one thing though, whether it's the data globally or we're seeing the data here, the severity, the hospitalizations, and particularly the deaths here in the US over the years, every year we see, thankfully, fewer deaths from COVID-19, and that's a function of a couple of things. One is that we, over time, have developed this composite immunity both from vaccination as well as the long-term immunity that might come from T-cell memory from prior infections or from vaccinations. And because of that, even with the new variants that appear, if they're not completely different, we're maintaining some of that basic level of immunity that's reducing hospitalization and death rates.

This year the FDA has made a decision that the main composition of the COVID-19 vaccine will be monovalent, and it will focus on the LP.8.1 variant, which is related to the JN.1, which has been circulating.

One of the biggest concerns for any viral infections or viruses —particularly things like influenza or COVID-19—is their continuous evolution, and one of the most effective ways we've been able to do that is to track genomic surveillance, looking at continuous sequencing of positive samples that are coming from clinical practice as well as from laboratories, clinical laboratories. And the concern here is that globally, the genomic surveillance and investments that have been made for COVID-19, some of them have been pulled back because of funding issues. So I worry about ensuring that we still have the same level of data in terms of the evolution of SARS-CoV-2.

Another couple of ways that we've done this is through wastewater surveillance, which is still being maintained but again, I think globally that picture is a bit more mixed and we don't have as much data on the genomic surveillance for wastewater.

The third way is global collaboration. We need to continue to share information about new sequences through networks like the WHO's CoViNet, which are essential for accurate and early detection of coronaviruses. And I think ensuring that our experts at CDC and elsewhere are working with WHO and other countries is going to be important for us to stay ahead to monitor what's happening in the rest of the world.

Announcer:
That was Dr. Nahid Bhadelia talking about the COVID-19 landscape today. To access this and other episodes in our series, visit *Clinician's Roundtable* on ReachMD.com, where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening!