

South American health networks struggling as Omicron cases rise



Brasilia, January 18 (RHC)-- The rapid spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant has prompted dire warnings from healthcare workers across South America, as pressure builds at hospitals whose employees are taking sick leave, leaving facilities understaffed to cope with COVID-19.

A major hospital in Bolivia's largest city stopped admitting new patients due to a lack of personnel. One of Brazil's most populous states cancelled scheduled surgeries for a month. And Argentina's federation of private healthcare providers told the Associated Press news agency that it estimates about 15 percent of its health workers currently have the virus.

The third wave "is affecting the health team a lot, from the cleaning staff to the technicians, with a high percentage of sick people, despite having a complete vaccination schedule," said Jorge Coronel, president of Argentina's medical confederation. "While symptoms are mostly mild to moderate, that group needs to be isolated."

About two-thirds of South America's roughly 435 million residents are fully immunised, the highest percentage for any global region, according to Our World in Data, and health workers in Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina have already been receiving booster shots. But the Omicron variant has sent case numbers surging.

Argentina saw an average of 112,000 daily confirmed cases in the week through January 16, up from 3,700 a month earlier, while data from Brazil's health ministry shows a jump to an average of 69,000 daily cases in the same seven-day period, up 1,900 percent from the month before.

Brazil's council of state health secretariats estimates that between 10 and 20 percent of all professionals in the health network — including doctors, nurses, nurse technicians, ambulance drivers and others in direct contact with patients — have taken sick leave since the last week of 2021. "We are having trouble making the schedules," said the council's director, Carlos Lula.

The press office of Rio de Janeiro state's health secretariat told AP that about 5,500 professionals have left their jobs since December. All elective surgeries scheduled in the state health network have been suspended for four weeks. As for urgent care, relocations and overtime are being used as stopgap measures.

"Forty percent of our staff is on sick leave," said Marcia Fernandes Lucas, health secretary for the municipality of Sao Joao de Meriti, in Rio's metropolitan region. "We are able to work with these 60 percent by redeploying them (between health centers)."

In Bolivia, public hospitals are operating at 50-70 percent capacity due to the high number of infections among healthcare workers, according to the Bolivian doctors' union. In Santa Cruz, the country's most populous city, the Children's Hospital is overwhelmed — but less by its number of patients than the amount of staff falling ill, according to Freddy Rojas, its vice director. Last week, the facility stopped admitting new patients.

"There has been a collapse because we don't have replacements," said Jose Luis Guaman, interim president of the doctors' union in Santa Cruz.

Last week, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) warned that the health system in the region was "being challenged" amid unprecedented numbers of new infections linked to the Omicron variant. PAHO Director Carissa Etienne said cases across the Americas rose to 6.1 million on January 8, up from 3.4 million cases on January 1.

"Infections are accelerating across every corner of the region of the Americas, and once again, our health systems are being challenged as emergency room visits and hospitalisations are rising," Etienne said during a news briefing.

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