

Connecting Communities for COVID19 News

4th Feb 2022

Isolation Tips

Streets of tsunami-hit Tonga empty on first day of COVID lockdown

"Normally this road would be queueing with vehicles and people, but as you can see all shops are closed, everything is closed - taxi stands, shops, supermarkets, it's closed," said local journalist Marian Kupu as she stood at a deserted crossroads in the capital, shuttered buildings behind her. "It's a ghost town here in Nuku'alofa." There had been fears an influx of international ships and planes delivering badly-needed water, shelter and food after last month's devastating volcanic eruption had increased the risk of a pandemic outbreak in the isolated Pacific nation.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/streets-tsunami-hit-tonga-empty-first-day-covid-lockdown-2022-02-03/>

Hygiene Helpers

Saudi Arabia requires citizens to take COVID booster shot to travel abroad starting Feb. 9

Saudi Arabia said on Thursday that citizens will be required to take the COVID-19 booster shot to be able to travel abroad starting Feb. 9, state media reported. The kingdom is also requiring visitors to present a negative PCR result before entry.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-requires-citizens-take-covid-booster-shot-travel-abroad-starting-2022-02-03/>

Medicare opens up access to free at-home COVID-19 tests

The Biden administration, seeking to fill a frustrating gap in COVID-19 testing coverage, announced on Thursday that people with Medicare will be able to get free over-the-counter tests much more easily in the coming weeks. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services said Medicare will cover up to eight free tests per month, starting in early spring. The tests will be handed out at participating pharmacies and other locations. They'll be available to people who have Medicare's "Part B" outpatient benefit, which about 9 in 10 enrollees sign up for. Last month, the administration directed private insurers to cover up to eight free tests a month for people on their plans. Officials said at the time they were still trying to figure out what to do about Medicare, which covers more than 60 million people, most of them age 65 or older and more vulnerable to severe illness from coronavirus infection.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-medicare-a7f307eb589067624163dfde3ac80bce>

S. Korea expands rapid testing amid record COVID infections

South Korea on Thursday began enforcing a new coronavirus testing policy centered on rapid testing as health officials reported a record number of new infections following the Lunar New Year holiday. The 22,907 new cases reported by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency marked a second straight day of over 20,000 new infections and about a five-fold increase from daily cases seen in mid-January, when the highly contagious omicron variant first became the country's dominant strain. Long lines snaked around testing stations in the capital Seoul and other major cities, where most people were provided rapid antigen test kits to use under the supervision of health workers, who then approved lab tests for anyone who tested positive.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-seoul-south-korea-35d2305e4079bc07eada37d1d77c123>

Study: One-third of students in each class will be infected with COVID-19

A group of researchers from the Technion and Rambam Hospital on Wednesday published a model of the new quarantine outline in the Israeli education system. According to a report on Kan 11 News, the researchers said that a third of the students in each class will be infected with COVID-19 under the current outline which includes two COVID-19 tests per day. The model was presented to researchers at a conference of the Israel National Institute for Health Policy Research. According to the model, in a format of two tests per week, cases will be missed and 30% of students in each class will be infected. The researchers said that if an additional test per week is added and three tests are carried out per week, the morbidity in each class will drop to 20%. They added that performing a test every day would lower the rate of infection in each class to 10%.

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/321632>

Guernsey to offer Covid booster jabs to 16 and 17 year olds

All 16 and 17 year olds in Guernsey will be offered a booster dose of the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine. The move brings the Bailiwick in line with the UK, following advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). Third jabs will be offered three months after the second dose, the Committee for Health and Social Care (HSC) said.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-guernsey-60240991>

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<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-seoul-south-korea-35d2305e4079bc07eada37d1d77c123>

Community Activities

Olympic spotlight back on China for a COVID-tinged Games

Long before the global pandemic upended sports and the world in general, the 2022 Winter Olympics faced unsettling problems. It started with the fact that hardly anybody wanted to host them. Beijing ended up solving that problem, but only after four European cities thought about it and dropped out, mostly because of expense and lack of public support. In the end, it was a race between two authoritarian countries. The IOC narrowly chose China's capital and its mostly bone-dry surrounding mountains over a bid from Kazakhstan. "It really is a safe choice," IOC President Thomas Bach said after the balloting.

<https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-Beijing-china-opening-ceremony-f2335793918e4580952e172b2316d6b0>

Indian health workers allege widespread vaccine certificate fraud

Health workers on the frontline of India's Covid vaccination programme say people are being officially registered as double vaccinated without receiving both doses because of pressure to meet government targets. Workers described how easy it was to falsely register second vaccine doses for people who did not attend appointments, by using personal records from their first dose and opting to bypass a code sent to their mobile phone.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/02/indian-health-workers-allege-widespread-vaccine-certificate>

Venezuela COVID patients, exhausted doctors get mental health help from medical charity

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is providing mental health care for COVID-19 patients, their families and also medical staff in two public hospitals in Venezuela to support the country's run-down health system. They are organizing phone and video calls between the sick and their loved ones and even

helping dying patients to say their goodbyes, Elizabeth Hernandez, who leads MSF's effort at Caracas' Lidice hospital, said. She said they are providing one-on-one mental health consultations for doctors and nurses.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/venezuela-covid-patients-exhausted-doctors-get-mental-health-help-medical-2022-02-02/>

Anti-vaccine mandate protesters say they will block Ottawa for as long as necessary

Truck drivers who have been blockading downtown Ottawa for six days on Wednesday said they had no intention of leaving the Canadian capital until the government scrapped COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Despite increasing complaints from residents about noise, pollution and aggressive behavior from some truckers, Ottawa police have declined to end the protest, citing the risk of aggravating tensions. The demonstration began as a move to force the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to drop a vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/anti-vaccine-protesters-say-they-will-block-ottawa-long-necessary-2022-02-02/>

Working Remotely

Why Listening To Your Employees Is Key To A Dynamic Remote/Hybrid Work Environment

Most employees and companies have proven that a remote workforce works, but there are companies that are looking to bring employees back to the office. Is that what employees want? From what you read and what people are telling me: not really. A recent survey found that 76% of working Americans want their company to make work permanently flexible in terms of schedule and/or location. Companies need to meet employees "where they are," and even if your company has plans to go back in person, creating an incredible remote experience still needs to be prioritized

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2022/02/03/why-listening-to-your-employees-is-key-to-a-dynamic-remote-hybrid-work-environment/>

Work From Anywhere: The best places for remote workers that are within three hours of GMT

Interest in working flexibly or opting for a "workation" has soared since the start of the pandemic, with many workers and employers recognising that office hours don't always have to take place within the confines of an office block. Now, a new survey has revealed that more than four out of five (84 per cent) of respondents polled say Working From Anywhere (WFA) is the new Working From Home (WFH), with respondents keen to combine a career with travelling the world. An awareness of the advantages that come with working in similar time zones has resulted in a shortlist of the 10 best countries to WFA within three hours of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/best-places-remote-working-time-zone-uk-b2006818.html>

Hong Kong expands government work-from-home plans as Omicron bites

The Hong Kong government said on Thursday it would extend a work-from-home plan for civil servants as health officials warned tougher measures could follow amid a worsening COVID-19 outbreak. Aside from those involved with essential and urgent work, all other civil servants - who had been due to resume work on Friday - will remain working from home until Feb. 11. Health officials said on Thursday many untraceable transmission chains of the Omicron variant were spreading across the global financial hub - a warning that comes as many Hongkongers enjoy Lunar New Year gatherings. "There is quite severe community transmission at the moment," said

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-expands-government-work-from-home-plans-omicron-bites-2022-02-03/>

Virtual Classrooms

We need to move beyond the synchronous versus asynchronous debate

The pandemic's push to experiment with online materials has brought to the fore the possibility of replacing traditional educational models with ones enhanced by technology. On the supply side, rather than watching a video of your professor give an introductory lecture on a topic, there are now world-class faculty offering such videos for free. No university expects to produce all of its own textbooks – might we one day think the same of lectures? On the demand side, computerised adaptive learning and testing offers more personalised educational models.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/we-need-move-beyond-synchronous-versus-asynchronous-debate>

Covid-19: Universities move to online learning for semester 1 as Omicron looms

Auckland University is moving most of its teaching online until the mid-semester break due to the threat of Omicron. The university's executive committee announced the decision on Thursday, saying it wanted to give students and staff clarity and predictability. The decision comes shortly after the university decided to move exams online for 2022, regardless of Covid-19 traffic light settings.

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/300510080/covid19-universities-move-to-online-learning-for-semester-1-as-omicron-looms>

Westminster has 'no remit' for UK-wide online academy

The Welsh and Scottish governments have hit out at UK government plans for a national online academy offering "the best lessons" from "the very best teachers". They say Westminster has "no remit" to establish a UK-wide academy, that they have not been consulted and that the existence of separate education systems in Scotland and Wales has not been taken into account. Meanwhile, edtech industry leaders have questioned whether the UK government has evidence that there is headteacher demand for the "new digital education service". The plans for the free online resource were contained in the Levelling Up White Paper

<https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/westminster-has-no-remit-set-uk-wide-online-learning-schools-academy>

Public Policies

New Covid vaccine Nuvaxovid approved after almost 50,000 people involved in UK clinical trials

A fifth Covid vaccination has been given regulatory approval in the UK. Nuvaxovid, developed by Novavax, has been authorised by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) after safety, quality and effectiveness tests. The next step will see it considered for use in the Covid-19 vaccination programme, health secretary Sajid Javid said today (Thursday, February 3). It follows approval given for Moderna, Oxford/AstraZeneca, Pfizer/BioNTech and the Janssen vaccine (although this is not currently available), the NHS says. Almost 50,000 people were involved in clinical trials for the new vaccine. Mr Javid said: "It is great to see our world renowned medicines regulator approve another COVID-19 vaccine.

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/uk-news/new-covid-vaccine-nuvaxovid-approved-22973156>

Singapore approves Pfizer's oral COVID-19 medicine Paxlovid

Singapore has approved Pfizer's (PFE.N) oral COVID-19 medicine Paxlovid, its Health Sciences Authority (HSA) said on Thursday. Paxlovid is the first COVID-19 oral treatment authorised for use in the city-state for the treatment of mild to moderate cases among adults at high risk of severe disease, HSA said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/singapore-approves-pfizers-oral-covid-19-medicine-paxlovid-2022-02-03/>

Ardern Starts to Reopen New Zealand Border as Frustration Mounts

New Zealand will finally begin reopening to the world at the end of this month as frustration mounts over a border that's been closed for almost two years to keep out Covid-19. The border will reopen

to vaccinated New Zealanders from Australia at midnight on Feb. 27 and from the rest of the world at midnight on March 13, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said in a speech Thursday in Auckland. Some groups of critical and skilled workers will also be permitted to enter from those dates. Arrivals will no longer need to spend time in a government managed isolation facility, but will be required to self-isolate and return negative tests.

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-02/ardern-starts-to-reopen-new-zealand-border-as-frustration-mounts?utm_source=google&utm_medium=bd&cmpid=google

France's COVID vaccine pass to stay until ICUs are 'emptied', says health minister

France's vaccine pass will remain in place until hospitals are able to function normally without cancelling non-emergency procedures to make room for COVID patients in intensive care, Health Minister Olivier Veran said. The government says the vaccine pass helps curb the spread of the coronavirus and has spurred more people to get the COVID shot, alleviating pressure on hospitals. Critics say it impinges on civil liberties and some have taken to the streets in protest.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-covid-vaccine-pass-stay-until-icub-are-emptied-says-health-minister-2022-02-02/>

Maintaining Services

S Africa's Afrigen makes mRNA COVID vaccine using Moderna data

South Africa's Afrigen Biologics has used the publicly available sequence of Moderna's COVID-19 mRNA vaccine to make its own version of the shot, which could be tested in humans before the end of this year, Afrigen's top executive said on Thursday. The vaccine candidate would be the first to be made based on a widely used vaccine without the assistance and approval of the developer. It is also the first mRNA vaccine designed, developed and produced at lab scale on the African continent. The White House declined to comment. Airlines for America, which represents American Airlines, Delta Air Lines Inc, United Airlines Holdings and others said as of last week international air travel was down 38% over 2019 levels. In December, the Biden administration imposed tougher new rules requiring international air travelers arriving in the United States to obtain a negative COVID-19 test within one day of travel.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/3/s-africas-afrigen-makes-mrna-covid-vaccine-using-moderna-data>

Strained US hospitals seek foreign nurses amid visa windfall

With American hospitals facing a dire shortage of nurses amid a slogging pandemic, many are looking abroad for health care workers. And it could be just in time. There's an unusually high number of green cards available this year for foreign professionals, including nurses, who want to move to the United States — twice as many as just a few years ago. That's because U.S. consulates shut down during the coronavirus pandemic weren't issuing visas to relatives of American citizens, and, by law, these unused slots now get transferred to eligible workers. Amy L. Erlbacher-Anderson, an immigration attorney in Omaha, Nebraska, said she has seen more demand for foreign nurses in two years than the rest of her 18-year career. And this year, she said, it's more likely they'll get approved to come, so long as U.S. consular offices can process all the applications.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-immigration-travel-business-health-525b951967525e75ba40a03433c3bf>

Schools seek volunteer teachers amid COVID staffing crunch

The answer around the U.S. could be a local police officer, National Guard soldier, state budget analyst, parent or recent high school graduate — nearly anyone willing to help keep schools' doors open through the omicron-driven staffing crunch. States have been loosening teaching requirements to give schools more flexibility on hiring as coronavirus exposures, illness and quarantines add to strains on schools that also have been tapping librarians, custodians and support staff to help cover classrooms during the pandemic. Brian McKinney, a parent with students in second and 10th grade

in Hays County, Texas, spent part of this week as a substitute, helping sixth graders through a social studies assignment that had them writing essays about the Soviet Union. A former teacher, he decided he could help as he waited out a cold snap that has slowed business at the World War II-themed miniature golf course he and his wife now own.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-business-education-texas-81e294609570160758ac14dd1d5d5ba0>

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-guernsey-60240991>

Healthcare Innovations

Omicron sub-variant BA.2 harder to identify, found in 5 African nations -WHO

The BA.2 sub-variant of Omicron has been found in five African countries, a World Health Organization scientist said on Thursday, adding she was concerned about the development because samples of BA.2 may not be spotted as a form of Omicron. The BA.2 sub-variant has begun to replace Omicron's more common "original" BA.1 variant in countries such as Denmark. Data from there suggests no difference in disease severity, according to another WHO official

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-sub-variant-ba2-found-5-african-countries-who-scientist-2022-02-03/>

Placenta may have mechanism that protects fetus from COVID; vaccines safe with rheumatic diseases

The following is a summary of some recent studies on COVID-19. They include research that warrants further study to corroborate the findings and that has yet to be certified by peer review. Placenta may shed proteins to keep virus out. The placenta may have a way to protect itself and the fetus from infection with the coronavirus, a small study suggests. Researchers studied 24 women who gave birth between July 2020 and April 2021. Eight had symptomatic COVID-19 in the second trimester, eight were sick from the virus in the third trimester, and eight were not infected during pregnancy.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/placenta-may-have-mechanism-that-protects-fetus-covid-vaccines-safe-with-2022-02-02/>