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Center for Health Security

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Today's Headlines: February 13, 2023

Hearings This Week

Full Committee Hearing to Receive Testimony on Global Security Challenges and Strategy. *Senate Armed Services Committee. 2/15/2023, 9:30AM. Dirksen SD-G50.*

President Biden's Border Crisis is a Public Health Crisis. *Joint House Oversight And Investigations Subcommittee And Health Subcommittee. 2/15/2023, 7:00PM. Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council, 301 W Railroad St., Building D, Weslaco, TX 78596.*

Examining Health Care Workforce Shortages: Where Do We Go From Here? *Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions. 2/16/2023, 10:00AM. 430 Dirksen Senate Office Building.*

COVID-19

Clinical Practice

Real-world use of nirmatrelvir–ritonavir in outpatients with COVID-19 during the era of omicron variants including BA.4 and BA.5 in Colorado, USA: a retrospective cohort study (*The Lancet Infectious Diseases*) Nirmatrelvir is a protease inhibitor with in-vitro activity against SARS-CoV-2, and ritonavir-boosted nirmatrelvir can reduce the risk of progression to severe COVID-19 among individuals at high risk infected with delta and early omicron variants. We used our real-world data platform to evaluate the effect of nirmatrelvir–ritonavir treatment on 28-day hospitalisation, mortality, and emergency department visits among outpatients with early symptomatic COVID-19 during a SARS-CoV-2 omicron (BA.2, BA2.12.1, BA.4, and BA.5) predominant period in Colorado, USA. Real-world evidence reported during a BA.2, BA2.12.1, BA.4, and BA.5 omicron surge showed an association between nirmatrelvir–ritonavir treatment and reduced 28-day all-cause hospitalisation, all-cause mortality, and visits to the emergency department.

Long-term effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against infections, hospitalisations, and mortality in adults: findings from a rapid living systematic evidence synthesis and meta-analysis up to December, 2022 (*The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*) In this rapid living systematic evidence synthesis and meta-analysis, we searched EMBASE and the US National Institutes of Health's iSearch COVID-19 Portfolio, supplemented by manual searches of COVID-19-specific sources, until Dec 1, 2022, for studies that reported vaccine effectiveness immediately and at least 112 days after a primary vaccine series or at least 84 days after a booster dose. Our analyses indicate that vaccine effectiveness generally decreases over time against SARS-CoV-2 infections, hospitalisations, and mortality. The baseline vaccine effectiveness levels for the omicron variant were notably lower than for other variants.

Public & Global Health

Why Mississippi, a Covid Hot Spot, Left Millions in Pandemic Aid Unspent (*NYT*) When the coronavirus first scythed through the nation in early 2020, few places needed help fighting it more than Scott County, Miss., a rural patch of chicken processing plants and pine forests an hour east of the state capital, Jackson. So when the Biden administration gave Mississippi \$18.4 million in mid-2021 to hire public health workers — part of \$2 billion in grants to bolster the Covid work force at state and local health agencies nationwide — it appeared that help had, at long last, arrived. But as of January, 18 months later, Mississippi had spent just \$3.6 million of its grant — less than a fifth. Its attempts to hire epidemiologists, nurses and other soldiers in the war against Covid had largely fallen flat. The state has lost one in 224 residents to Covid-19, one of the nation's worst death rates, including 122 people in tiny Scott County alone.

For Older Americans, the Pandemic Is Not Over (*New York Times*) For older Americans, the pandemic still poses significant dangers. About three-quarters of Covid deaths have occurred in people over 65, with the greatest losses concentrated among those over 75. In January, the number of Covid-related deaths fell after a holiday spike but nevertheless numbered about 2,100 among those

ages 65 to 74, more than 3,500 among 75- to 84-year-olds and nearly 5,000 among those over 85. Those three groups accounted for about 90 percent of the nation's Covid deaths last month.

Science & Technology

How the World Health Organization helped kill a promising made-in-Canada vaccine (CBC) In a pandemic, a sizable amount of flexibility is required. The World Health Organization (WHO) has championed the need for out-of-the-box thinking on vaccine production and supplies to protect the world. But when faced with that very situation, the WHO evoked a 2005 policy, and sentenced a promising made-in-Canada vaccine to a tragic death because of a minority link with a tobacco company.

COVID-19 made pulse oximeters ubiquitous. Engineers are fixing their racial bias (NPR) During the COVID-19 pandemic, one measurement became more important than almost any other — blood oxygen saturation. It was the one concrete number that doctors could use to judge how severe a case of COVID-19 was and know whether to admit people into the hospital and provide them with supplemental oxygen. But pulse oximeters, the device most commonly used to measure blood oxygen levels, don't work as well for patients of color.

Mpox

WHO may soon end mpox emergency — but outbreaks rage in Africa (Nature) A World Health Organization (WHO) committee met earlier this week to decide whether the mpox outbreak — which began in May 2022 — is still a global public-health emergency, and the agency could soon declare it over. The outbreak has subsided in countries including the United Kingdom and the United States, thanks to the deployment of vaccines and therapeutics, as well as changes in awareness and social behaviour. But the same is not true in some nations in West and Central Africa, which have been battling the monkeypox virus for decades, and where the disease's toll has been historically highest.

Public & Global Health

Social Media Listening and Community Feedback on COVID-19 and Vaccines: Humanitarian Situation Report - January 2023 (ReliefWeb) In January 2023, Internews collected 265 rumors,

misconceptions, and community feedback from social media and via face-to-face listening groups, in Arabic and Angasana, about COVID-19 and vaccines in Sudan. Forty-two rumors were shared by displaced people residing in Abu Shouk Camp in North Darfur, and Al-Shaheed Afandi Camp and Agageer village in Blue Nile. Additionally, 34 rumors were collected from social media platforms most commonly used in the country, including Facebook and Twitter. The community feedback and rumors were selected based on a risk analysis that identifies misinformation that could potentially impact vulnerable people, which are the target communities of the Rooted in Trust Sudan project. In January 2023, rumors featuring death due to COVID-19 vaccines were a rising stand-alone theme, accounting for 8% of rumor data.

Concerns mount over a public health breakdown in northwest Syria (*Devex*) In the wake of the earthquakes in Syria and Turkey on Feb. 6, it's unclear how many health facilities were damaged, but there are grave concerns rebel-held northwest Syria's public health systems could be on the brink of collapse. The health systems in the country's northwest have been "pulverized" from the 12 years of conflict, said Dr. Michael Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organization's Health Emergencies Programme, during a press conference on Sunday. This has included physical damage to infrastructure and the exodus of health workers.

See also: **Earthquake aid crisis in Syria a "perfect storm"** (*Vox*)

Spain health workers hold huge Madrid protest over state of health system (*Reuters*) Hundreds of thousands of Spain's health workers protested in Madrid on Sunday over what they say is the destruction of the public health system by the conservative regional government. The Madrid government has been the target of criticism in recent years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, over poor staffing in hospitals and primary healthcare centres. Protesters say it is dismantling public health services and favouring private health providers.

Biological Agents and Infectious Diseases

Eight countries eliminated a neglected tropical disease in 2022 (*Nature*) Malawi, Vanuatu and Uganda were among the eight nations that eliminated a neglected tropical disease last year, according to a World Health Organization (WHO) report. That takes the number of countries that have done so since the late 1990s to almost 50, with 11 banishing more than one disease. NTDs are a group of around 20 conditions that affect more than one billion people worldwide but have been largely overlooked by global health agendas. The diseases generally affect people living in impoverished communities and can be caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites or toxins.

Domestic Preparedness & Response

Memes, Tweets, Snark Are the FDA's New Public Health Weapons (*Bloomberg Law*) When Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed during a National Football League game in January, dozens of Twitter trolls quickly blamed it on Covid-19 shots. "Snake-oil salesmen" seized on the event, said Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Robert Califf in an interview. The #diedsuddenly hashtag, which appeared in tweets about the incident, is often used to discredit vaccines by linking them to deaths and injuries without evidence. The FDA is treading a fine line between responding to misinformation on social media without amplifying it.

Global Health Security

Illuminating the dark: understanding our social interactions to improve influenza pandemic preparedness and response (*World Health Organization*) The WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific has taken steps to explore the role and potential of dark social communication for promoting health messages and reducing the spread of misleading information during and between influenza pandemics. The private nature of the dark social is a challenge for multisource social listening, which allows Member States, WHO, and partners to gather the insights of and feedback from target audiences and other sources; determine the strengths and weaknesses of risk communication tools and tactics; identify key community concerns, myths, and misunderstandings; and assess risk perceptions, knowledge, and behaviours.

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