

Western Media Sucks Away People's Energy by Feeding upon their Fears and Hopes

News:

An alarming headline in the *Independent* newspaper on the 15th of July read: "'Stealthy' new Covid variant can reinfect you every month." It has confused many people in the UK, but is it true?

Comment:

While Covid variants present many dangers, what the *Independent* headline claims is not backed by science even though the article quotes from the excellent research of eminent scientists such as Professor Danny Altmann.

What is well understood by biologists is that the viruses that cause Covid-19 continually adapt to escape detection by the antibodies that our immune systems have made to protect us against previous infections or vaccinations. They have been doing this since the beginning of the pandemic, and for a very long time to come, this 'arms race' between man and virus will continue (non-gender neutral terminology is used with pride here – forgive the additional play on words). The Omicron variant has been so good at this that it has become a family of recognized sub-variants. As time has passed, the antibodies generated by vaccination with the early viral strain fresh out of Wuhan came to provide almost zero protection against infection with the latest family-members labelled BA.5. Nevertheless, the immune responses our bodies make do lessen the damage the virus does. This is partly because antibodies are not the only adaptive weapon in our immune system. T-cell immune responses can remain effective against new variants, which are still fundamentally the same virus, because T-cells see viruses in a different way to the B-cells that make antibodies, and our T-cells are not as easily fooled by the variants as are B-cells.

The research that informed the *Independent* article was published in the prestigious scientific research journal *Science*, and co-author Professor Altmann is quoted in the *Independent* as saying about Omicron: "It is a kind of stealth virus that gets in under the radar ... even having had Omicron, we're not well protected from further infections". He is not reported as saying that you can be infected every month, so perhaps this click-bait style title was chosen by an editor to bring in more revenue for the paper. Indeed, the same article has been regularly appearing in news feeds with new dates in order to stay in the public eye.

This is a pity because the science is of the highest value and ought to be brought to the public attention in its correct light. The original research article shows that 'immune imprinting' from infection with the original Wuhan Hu-1 virus biased the immune responses of those subsequently infected with Omicron, such that B and T-cell responses were reinforced against the original Wuhan Hu-1 virus, while being less against Omicron itself. This reduction is called 'immune-damping'. The phenomenon may seem strange, but it has been described many times before for other viruses. Simply put, many parts of a virus are seen by the immune system as 'foreign' and antibodies and other immune mediators are produced against these to defend us against future infection. These parts of the virus are called epitopes, and if we are reinfected our immune system is now very sensitive to these 'epitopes' and greatly boosts the immune response against them. Unfortunately, if the virus changes a little bit, by mutation of some of these epitopes, a relatively small immune response is generated against the new epitopes and the immune system focuses most of its energy on boosting its defenses against those viral epitopes that remain the same.

Omicron and any variants that succeed it will probably continue to harm people for some time to come and this epidemic is bad enough without an epidemic of sensationalism and re-reporting the same facts over and over till people become more immune to important public health updates than they are to Covid-19.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
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Link to the research in the journal *Science*:

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abq1841>