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BIOSURVEILLANCE DETECTS SARS-COV-2 MUTATIONS; FURTHER INVESTIGATION NEEDED TO DETERMINE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATION

Press Release | 18 February 2021

Following the enhanced genomic biosurveillance in the country, the Department of Health (DOH) and the University of the Philippines - Philippine Genome Center (UP-PGC) today confirm the detection of SARS-CoV-2 mutations of potential clinical significance in samples sequenced last week from Central Visayas. The DOH and UP-PGC however emphasize that current available data are insufficient to conclude that the mutations found in the local samples will have significant public health implications.

The DOH further reiterates that viruses naturally undergo mutations as they reproduce, both within the human body and when they are transmitted from one person to another. These mutations accumulate over time and may have varying effects. However, not all mutations and variants necessarily cause negative effects. Variants, on the other hand, pertain to a group of viruses which have the same set of mutations. Those classified as variants of concern have reported clinical significance, such as the increased transmissibility of the B.1.1.7 variant. Moreover, continued biosurveillance has enabled the detection of variants of concern as well as allowed the monitoring of the clinical significance of other variants and mutations detected among sequenced samples.

Nevertheless, the DOH recognizes the potential public health implications of these reported mutations in samples from Region 7. The Center for Health Development (CHD) in Central Visayas has initiated measures to contain the transmission in the region and investigation to characterize the cases and areas of concern. Additional samples for sequencing shall be submitted by Region 7 which shall provide additional information to guide their ongoing COVID-19 response. However, we would like to emphasize that our biosurveillance efforts extend beyond this enhanced response in Region 7 and is inclusive of all regions to give us better national and regional pictures of these mutations and variants.

The DOH once again enjoins everyone to take an active part in keeping infection rates low, and ultimately reducing the chances of viral mutations, by strictly adhering to the minimum public health standards and protocols of our PDITR strategy.