OC5_3-10 communication_with_policymakers

[00:00:16.90] Well, I think-- I work in Thailand. So I think our country relies on having tourist coming in to help with the economy. I think in the Caribbean as well, how do you balance the issue of data transparency, sharing what we find as quickly as possible, and the impact on the economy?

[00:00:37.58] So that was a difficult one in the Caribbean. And from our perspective, we were doing the sequencing work in Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of 17 countries for much of the time, eventually other capacity was built and stuff. So we were a little distant from the sort of policy end of what was happening in the other islands.

[00:00:59.62] And it was clear that different islands handled it differently. You would see some places where you would you'd send data on sequences. And there's a variant there. And you would immediately in the press see it the next day. And others, it would take a little while.

[00:01:15.68] I mean I think it's understandable. People have their economies to think about. But I think for me, one of the things the gaps we had was a gap in education and understanding. I think that if the populations understood-- had a better understanding of the science and the sort of even-- I'm not saying like deep understanding-- but a better scientific background and could understand how science works and why this is important, I think, I suspect the governments might be a little more free to give them a little more latitude to make difficult decisions. Because then the population would understand better.

[00:02:01.48] Other countries in Trinidad and Tobago, it wasn't such an issue. Our main source of funds is not tourism. It's-- we actually have oil and natural gas. So it was not as much of a pressure in Trinidad. And at least our ministry and our chief medical officer, I found, were very, very open to receiving the data and very transparent when it came to putting it back out. Within hours or days, they would report something.

[00:02:32.02] So we had a different context. It depends on the context. It's not easy.

[00:02:37.66] Well, it's not easy at all. And I think-- I think the issue with Omicron that when the data came out and leads to the travel ban, I think that's the thing. And that doesn't help much. Because I think eventually, the virus can spread anyway. Do you have any thought on what should-- I mean, if someone ran the country or ran the Ministry of Public Health, what would be a good way for them to use the data. And to Richard? Emma?

[00:03:03.58] One thing that it's really good for is when you're transparent, it's-- you know that if some of your citizens have been on holiday or travelled to a certain country that a variant has been identified in. And then you know when they travel back, it's going to be good idea to test them quite rigorously when they enter the country and maybe to follow up a few days later. So at least you can try and contain potentially a variant entering your country. And I think that was found quite a lot is the introduction of new variants into countries is maybe where you want to target your surveillance and your issues like that.

[00:03:41.30] We found in terms of the utility of the actual data, I mean, being a small unit doing this work, we didn't have-- couldn't get the type of in-depth analyses that were being

done elsewhere and COG-UK, I think, to get that sort of information about transmission rates and it's-- we weren't able to do that. When we conveyed information about variants, for example, to our chief medical officer, the type of response you would get would be something simple like I have somebody-- this person's in quarantine. And instead of letting them out after one negative test, I'm going to make sure they do two negative tests. So it was simple things like that. And I think that's sort of slowing things down, trying to-- it's inevitable. But slowing things down while you get yourself together, I think was useful knowing what's coming and just being careful.

[00:04:34.28] To me, it's important to also separate the difference between being transparent about what you found and then what you do with that. Because I think that being transparent about what you find is going to be a win. I think to some extent, some governments have underestimated how much you can tell the public. Of course, you have to do it in a way that does not convey panic or fear, but I actually think that we underestimate the capacity for people to absorb information if you give it to them openly. And you also make it very clear what it means and what it doesn't mean.

[00:05:03.65] If you hide that, I think, you actually in the end end up losing trust. Because you're going to have to tell people at some point. And then they go why didn't you tell me earlier? And then you've lost trust that's really hard to build.

[00:05:15.74] But then I think separate from that is kind of what do you then do with that information. And this is something I think it's been really hard in the pandemic is decoupling the information we found a new variant from should we cancel all flights from that country. Those two things scientifically are not necessarily linked, but I think there's a lot of pressure in governments to be seen to do something, whether that something is something that is supported by the evidence or not. And I think especially in retrospect-- but we didn't-- I'd say midway through 2021, we really had an idea looking back at the alpha data that essentially these borders closures they don't keep these variants out. Unless you're going to take like the New Zealand approach and just keep everybody out.

[00:05:57.62] Yeah, that was the Trinidad approach.

[00:05:58.88] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:06:00.44] If you take these approaches then maybe it works. But for most countries they weren't and just stopping flights from one country. It isn't going to work.

[00:06:07.73] Yeah, no that's nonsense.

[00:06:08.72] Whether it might slow things down as you say that's one question. But we know now from looking at the genetics that at most, you're maybe going to by a week or two. So the question is what are you going to do with that time?

[00:06:20.03] Can you actually do something useful? And also it really implies that having a three month or a six month travel ban is pointless. At that point, it's in your country.

[00:06:28.80] I think it depends on-- I mean, if you're a little island, then it can keep you protected for a while. I mean, when you ban everybody as you said--

[00:06:37.16] Yes.

[00:06:37.73] Like [INAUDIBLE].

[00:06:38.54] So you can't--

[00:06:39.05] That's a different approach. Yeah. Yeah. If you really are keeping everybody out. But for most-- like for most of Europe, this is an approach that makes no sense. For most of the world, it's an approach that makes no sense.

[00:06:49.10] And yet, we were acting like, oh, well, we've banned everyone from South Africa for six months as if it's going to make a difference, and it didn't. So I think that-- that's been something that's very hard to convey to governments. Things like it's more important to do something that might make a difference rather than do something that looks like it's impressive, I guess.

[00:07:07.61] Yeah. No, no. I agree with you. I think for us and for many of the islands, the sort of total sealing of the country, nobody in nobody out, that went on for quite a while in some countries. And I think it did slow down introductions. And it gave us a chance to do simple things like set up testing, which would happen very rapidly in the UK or in Switzerland, where

[00:07:31.40] I suppose like in a week or two, you have your testing set up. That took us some time training people, all this stuff. So we-- that bought us some time. But it's not-- those, you close off and people get in even with the islands.

[00:07:44.33] You have undocumented entries by boats and things like that. So it didn't keep us safe forever. But I think initially it did help slow things down and give us a chance to catch ourselves. But obviously, it couldn't be maintained.