



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
COVID-19 Variants and Evolving Research Needs
May 12, 2021

Good morning and thank you to our witnesses for joining us this morning. Dr. Abdool Karim, I understand you are halfway around the world right now, so good evening to you.

Today's hearing could not be more timely. The United States has already made incredible strides in making safe, accessible vaccines available to all adults. Just this week, the FDA extended an authorization for 12- to 15-year-olds to receive the Pfizer vaccine. I understand that some of the basic science research performed at Argonne National Laboratory, home to one of our witnesses today, was a foundational part of creating mRNA vaccines. These scientific achievements were a gift to the world. They have already saved millions of lives, and they will save millions more. In the United States, every teenager and adult now has access to the tools they need to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

But we must not squander this gift.

We have no time to waste, because viral variants are threatening the progress the United States has made toward defeating COVID-19. In recent weeks, one variant has brought the entire nation of India to its knees. And the longer COVID-19 persists around the globe, the more mutations will emerge. Pandemics know no borders; an emerging variant anywhere is a public health threat everywhere. Our witnesses today will help us understand how emerging variants make it even more urgent to vaccinate fast – not in just the United States, but across the globe.

I also look forward to hearing about all the scientific tools we can use to spot a variant. The federal government supports an impressive range of infectious disease modeling, data sharing, and surveillance activities. We know now that these programs should have been coordinating more closely before the pandemic. A 2016 White House report offered a roadmap for exactly this: stitching together science activities across a dozen different agencies to enable better models of how diseases spread and change. Unfortunately, we did not get far enough on implementing those recommendations before COVID-19 reached our shores.

But it isn't too late to continue to improve the federal approach to disease forecasting and surveillance for this present-day crisis. We can deploy our best federal science capabilities to detect and understand variants as early as possible. This helps public officials and healthcare providers have the quality information they need to protect the public and save lives.

Thank you Subcommittee Chairman Foster and Ranking Member Obernolte for putting together this timely discussion. I yield back.