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Opinion – Sou Ciência: The return of the pandemic that was not

We are experiencing a new increase in the number of cases of covid-19 and several doubts arise: Should we sound the alarm and return to isolation? Should we be even more concerned about the increase in deaths? Are we entering a fourth wave? When will we actually get rid of the pandemic?

These are important questions for which we do not have definitive answers. A possible answer seems to be a long way off, as we do not have a clear policy to recognize and combat new health emergencies and re-emergencies. As at different times of the pandemic, which started in 2020 and has not yet ended, measures are being taken at random by institutions and municipalities or by individuals. The responsibility of the Brazilian State has been fully transferred to those who are able or willing to take action.

Meanwhile, universities and municipalities across the country are once again recommending the use of masks in closed places – a simple and effective prevention measure, abandoned early. Guidance was also made by the Federal Supreme Court (STF) for people who circulate within the Court in view of the increase in cases in the Federal District. It is now clear what science and scientists said about 2 months ago: it was too early to completely relax the use of masks.

Therefore, once again, it is necessary to reaffirm that decisions such as these must be based on scientific evidence and the research carried out over the last two years has taught us many things. We know that SARS-CoV-2 has a high mutation capacity and that now the Ômicron variant, even more transmissible than the original, and that Gamma and Delta, found a way to create subvariants.

The virus has become capable of infecting some animals, which can be producers of new variants that re-infect humans, creating an unvirtuous circle. At the moment, we have the continuity of the Ômicron wave, caused by the subvariant BA.2. How many more variants will we have? We still don’t know and everything indicates that we will have to live with SARS-CoV-2 for a long time.

This does not mean that we will isolate ourselves or that we will return to the serious conditions of 2020 and part of 2021, as science has provided us with vaccines, which are largely responsible for the lowest number of serious cases and deaths. However, we will have to have permanent surveillance systems and management for each epidemiological scenario, and for that it is necessary to continue research, SUS and public policies.

For these and other reasons, the now old SARS-CoV-2 continues to challenge us with the old Socratic maxim that accompanies the lives of scientists: “I only know that I know nothing” and that leads us to reflect on our human ignorance, but also the importance of seeking knowledge to save ourselves from barbarism.

In Brazil we had many scientists working, even in adverse conditions and in the face of budget cuts. These are genomic, epidemiological, sociological, technological studies, in addition to new vaccines that should be available soon, as research continues. Studying the coronavirus to create forms of control, this seems to be the most likely path.

That is why it will also be necessary to guarantee investment in science, guarantee that Brazilian scientists can work and that our universities and research institutes can continue to save lives.

The topic was even presented at a joint seminar with Folha de S. Paulo and Instituto Serrapilheira on May 31st. The event was attended by leading researchers: Fernanda de Negri (Ipea), Nelson Amaral (UFG) and Helena Nader (ABC) and can be accessed in full here.

Faced with the challenges we are experiencing, science has been and will continue to be a fundamental tool. Solutions come from simple but effective measures. In addition to vaccines, it is necessary to maintain hygiene protocols, the use of a mask, in addition to reflecting on a healthier life, with less depredation of ecosystems and that enables the health of the environment, animal and human, in a virtuous triad.

SARS-CoV-2 made us reflect on life, on science and on the possibility of a different and more sustainable future. We cannot erase all the lessons, however painful they may be and however much we wish we had never lived them. In this sense, education and science are transformative and, for this reason, are and will continue to be emancipatory. It is up to us to demand conditions and make knowledge continue to grow and positively transform our reality.

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