

Will approved vaccines stop the new South African COVID strain? Doubts emerge

Both Britain and South Africa have detected new, more transmissible variants of the COVID-19-causing virus in recent weeks that have driven a surge in cases. British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said on [January 1] he was now very worried about the variant identified in South Africa.

Simon Clarke, an associate professor in cellular microbiology at the University of Reading, said that while both variants had some new features in common, the one found in South Africa “has a number additional mutations ... which are concerning”.

He said these included more extensive alterations to a key part of the virus known as the spike protein.

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Oxford’s [John] Bell, who advises the UK government’s vaccine task force, said on [January 3] he thought vaccines would work on the British variant but said there was a “big question mark” as to whether they would work on the South African variant.

BioNTech’s [Ugur] Sahin told Germany’s Spiegel in an interview published on [January 1] that their vaccine, which uses messenger RNA to instruct the human immune system to fight the virus, should be able to protect against the UK variant.

“We are testing whether our vaccine can also neutralise this variant and will soon know more,” he said.

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