

NEW NAMING SYSTEM FOR VIRUS VARIANTS

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Soumya Swaminathan

The World Health Organization (WHO) would unveil a system of naming of coronavirus variants drawn from the way tropical storms are named, WHO Chief Scientist Soumya Swaminathan says.

“The new naming system should go live soon — yes, it will be names like hurricanes. This is so as not to stigmatise and deinceivise countries from making their sequencing results public. It will also be easier for the lay public to remember rather than these complicated lineage numbers,” she said in an email to *The Hindu* .

The WHO and health and science agencies across the world, for instance the Indian Council of Medical Research, the United States’ Centres for Disease Control and the Public Health England refer to viruses and their variants by formal lineage names, which are a combination of letters and names that point to the relationships between different variants.

To the trained eye, variants such as B.1.1.7 and B.1.617 suggest that they have certain mutations in common and as well clues to their evolutionary history.

Geographical tag

However, because virus names and their associated diseases have frequently been named after geographical places where outbreaks were first reported or samples first isolated — such as the West Nile virus or Ebola.

B.1.1.7 started to be known as the ‘U.K. variant’ and B.1.351 as the ‘South African’ variant.

India’s Health Ministry, in the aftermath of B.1.617 that was popularly called the ‘Indian variant’, issued a press release decrying the media’s use of the name.

The dilemma of having names that don’t stigmatise places but also are amenable to popular use has to an extent been solved by the system of naming hurricanes, or tropical cyclones. The World Meteorological Organisation leaves it to countries that surround a particular ocean basin to come up with names.

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