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BRAZIL is facing the biggest health system collapse in its history, according to researchers at Brazilian health institute Fiocruz, as the country records its highest number of weekly deaths since the pandemic began. Meanwhile, Chile has been forced to impose strict new lockdowns to cope with a severe second wave of infections, despite having mounted one of the world’s fastest vaccine roll-outs.

Brazil recorded 18,164 deaths last week, bringing its total to more than 300,000, a higher toll than any other country except the US. Many of the country’s intensive care units have reached capacity. “The lack of medication, materials and intensive care beds are turning the situation into chaos,” says Renata Pieratti Bueno, a doctor at the Hospital das Clinicas in São Paulo. The shortages and a lack of trained personnel are causing unnecessary deaths, she says. Brazil’s mortality rate for SARS-CoV-2 is already high: 8 out of 10 Brazilians intubated as a result of the virus have died compared with a global average of 5 out of 10, says Fernando Bozza at Fiocruz, which is based in Rio de Janeiro.

Information from hospital admissions suggests the virus is hitting more younger people, says Raphael Guimarães at Fiocruz, which is based in Rio de Janeiro. “It means that the pandemic in Brazil is reaching the younger population,” he says. The P.1 variant of the virus may be to blame for the high case numbers in Brazil. Studies suggest the variant has mutations that help it evade antibodies from previous infections or from vaccination, and thus may be able to reinfect people who have already been infected.

Despite a lack of viral genetic sequencing in Brazil, the samples that have been analysed show the variant is now dominant in some regions. “We have to strongly consider that P.1 is causing the increase in the number of cases right now,” says Nuno Faria at Imperial College London.

Researchers at Fiocruz have called for stricter measures, including lockdowns to reduce non-essential activity, increased use of face masks and social distancing. However, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro has consistently criticised lockdowns, saying they will hurt the poor, and has publicly referred to regional leaders who impose them as “tyrants”. The president told supporters at an event in Goiás on 5 March that the government regretted the deaths, but there had been “enough fussing and whining”.

The government has been slow to purchase vaccines and so far only 6.4 per cent of the population has received one dose. Infections appear to be stabilising at a high level due to increasing interventions from states that are imposing their own strict measures, says Jesem Orellana at Fiocruz, but the delay between infection and illness means the next two to three weeks will be critical.

Meanwhile, Chile has rolled out 50.46 doses of vaccine per 100 people. Nevertheless, on 25 March, the country recorded 6,196 new daily cases, and has reached almost 1 million cases in total. Around 95 per cent of intensive care beds are taken in the country. Strict lockdown measures have been put in place from 25 March for almost all of the country. These include an evening curfew and set times for exercise. Each person is only allowed to go outside for essential activities twice a week, and must request permits to do so.

The P.1 variant and the highly transmissible B.1.1.7 variant, which was first seen in England, together with lots of travel during Chile’s summer season have been blamed for the increase in cases.