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Analysis of the potential drivers of seasonality in COVID-19 transmission dynamics in 409 locations across 26 countries

Rachel Lowe¹, Ben Armstrong¹, Sam Abbott¹, Sophie Meakin¹, Kathleen O'Reilly¹, Rosa Von Borries², Rochelle Schneider¹, Dominic Roye³, Masahiro Hashizume⁴, Mathilde Pascal⁵, Aurelio Tobias⁶, Ana Maria Vicedo-Cabrera⁷, Antonio Gasparrini¹, Francesco Sera⁸, and the MCC Network & CMMID COVID-19 working group*

¹London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Infectious Disease Epidemiology, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain – England, Scotland, Wales (rachel.lowe@lshtm.ac.uk)

²Charité Universitätsmedizin, Berlin, Germany

³University of Santiago de Compostela, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain

⁴Department of Global Health Policy, Graduate School of Medicine, The University of Tokyo, Japan

⁵Santé Publique France, France

⁶Institute of Environmental Assessment and Water Research, Spanish Council for Scientific Research, Barcelona, Spain

⁷Universität Bern, Bern, Switzerland

⁸Department of Statistics, Computer Science and Applications "G. Parenti", University of Florence, Florence, Italy

*A full list of authors appears at the end of the abstract

More than a year since its emergence, there is conflicting evidence on the potential influence of weather conditions on SARS-CoV-2 transmission dynamics. We used a two-stage ecological modelling approach to estimate weather-dependent signatures in SARS-CoV-2 transmission in the early phase of the pandemic, using a dataset of 3 million COVID-19 cases reported until 31 May 2020, spanning 409 locations in 26 countries. We calculated the effective reproduction number (R_e) over a location-specific early-phase time-window of 10-20 days, for which local transmission had been established but before non-pharmaceutical interventions had become established as measured by the OxCGRT Government Response Index. We calculated mean levels of meteorological factors, including temperature and humidity observed in the same time window used to calculate R_e . Using a multilevel meta-regression approach, we modelled nonlinear effects of meteorological factors, while accounting for government interventions and socio-demographic factors. A weak non-monotonic association between temperature, absolute humidity and R_e was identified, with a decrease in R_e of 0.087 (95% CI: 0.025; 0.148) between mean temperature of 10.2°C (maximum) and 20°C (minimum) and a decrease in R_e of 0.061 (95% CI: 0.011; 0.111) between absolute humidity of 6.6 g/m³ (maximum) and 11 g/m³ (minimum). However, government interventions explained twice as much of the variation in R_e compared meteorological factors. We find little evidence of meteorological conditions having influenced the early stages of local epidemics, and conclude that population behaviour and governmental intervention are more important drivers of transmission.

MCC Network & CMMID COVID-19 working group: MCC Network: Wenbiao Hu, Shilu Tong, Eric Lavigne, Patricia Matus Correa, Xia Meng, Haidong Kan, Dominic Roye, Jan Kynčl, Aleš Urban, Hans Orru, Niilo Rytö, Simon Cauchemez, Marco Dallavalle, Alexandra Schneider, Ariana Zeka, Yasushi Honda, Chris Fook Sheng Ng, Barrak Alahmad, Shilpa Rao, Francesco Di Ruscio, Gabriel Carrasco, Xerxes Seposo, Iulian Horia Holobâc, Ho Kim, Whanhee Lee, Carmen Íñiguez, Martina S. Ragetti, Alicia Aleman, Valentina Colistro, Michelle Bell, Antonella Zanobetti, Joel Schwartz, Tran Ngoc Dang, Noah Scovronick, Micheline de Sousa Zanotti Stagliorio Coêlho, Magali Hurtado Diaz. CMMID COVID-19 working group: Timothy W Russell, Mihaly Koltai, Adam J Kucharski, Rosanna C Barnard, Matthew Quaife, Christopher I Jarvis, Jiayao Lei, James D Munday, Yung-Wai Desmond Chan, Billy J Quilty, Rosalind M Eggo, Stefan Flasche, Anna M Foss, Samuel Clifford, Damien C Tully, W John Edmunds, Petra Klepac, Oliver Brady, Fabienne Krauer, Simon R Procter, Thibaut Jombart, Alicia Rosello, Alicia Showering, Sebastian Funk, Joel Hellewell, Fiona Yueqian Sun, Akira Endo, Jack Williams, Amy Gimma, Naomi R Waterlow, Kiesha Prem, Nikos I Bosse, Hamish P Gibbs, Katherine E. Atkins, Carl A B Pearson, Yalda Jafari, C Julian Villabona-Arenas, Mark Jit, Emily S Nightingale, Nicholas G. Davies, Kevin van Zandvoort, Yang Liu, Frank G Sandmann, William Waites, Kaja Abbas, Graham Medley, Gwenan M Knight.