

PAC COVID-19 UPDATE

BY DR.

DONGWE



COVID-19 and the Lockdown: How effective is it and how soon should we expect a return to normal life?

The Covid-19 tragedy has indeed begun to grip our country as news of the first death in the country is announced by the Health Ministry. The numbers of confirmed infections have exceeded the 1000-mark with no sign of easing in sight. The government has had to resort to enforcing unpopular lockdown as a measure to curb the spread of the virus; and the society is divided about the lockdown.

Novel Corona Virus.

We all need to be aware that Covid-19 is a new virus and very little is understood about it. A lot of information is learnt in real time and by observing how it has behaved in other countries. These lessons are then interrogated and plans implemented in line with the successes of the countries where they had already been tried. This is why I will compare the approaches, reactions and results in different countries.

China.

This virus was firstly identified in Whuhan, China; hence some people label it as a “Chinese virus”. This is strongly criticised by the WHO because it would lead to misinformation and stigmatization. China had the initial high rate of infections and deaths as a result thereof. This prompted China to introduce lockdown, especially at Whuhan which was the epicentre of the virus; and immediately built makeshift hospitals for the infected. There are unsubstantiated reports of initial state secrecy about the virus, though the Chinese subsequently became more transparent in their reporting about the infections and allowed the rest of the world to copy and learn from their responses to the scourge of the virus.

China is accustomed to fighting such plagues, having previously battled the SARS in 2015. The efforts of China are beginning to yield positive results. China is no longer the epicentre and is reporting fewer new infections. The Chinese authorities are projecting that there will be no more new infections by April, 2020.

Italy.

Outside China, Italy has been leading in the numbers of new infections until recently when it was overtaken by the USA. Media and experts blame this high rate of new infections in Italy on the relaxed manner initially portrayed by the Italian authorities when the virus initially emerged earlier in January, 2020. The government did not see the need for the citizens to change their behaviour, thus people continued to live their lives like they normally did thereby unwittingly spreading the Covid-19.

Italy and many European countries have a much high geriatric population as opposed to developing nations. This may have been why the infections and fatality numbers soared so rapidly, an older population has higher risk conditions, such as heart diseases, diabetes and malignancies rendering them more vulnerable.

USA.

The USA has overtaken Italy in numbers of new infections and the death rates are climbing. A major challenge there is that the President is ignoring the expert advices and is not sending a clear message about the disease, in the same way as President Mbeki did during early stages of HIV/AIDS rise in this country. At present, it is not clear whether the lots of money that President Trump is pouring into combating the “Chinese

virus” (as he refers to it) will yield positive results, when there is indecisiveness on matters of discipline and containment.

Singapore.

This country has been praised for its response to the Covid-19. Singapore has the least number of infections notwithstanding its close proximity to the initial epicentre, China. There are no reported deaths associated with Covid-19 in Singapore. In their favour, Singapore has a world class health system, smaller population, aggressive testing and contact tracking measures, draconian tracing; and a population that is more accepting of state intrusive measures to protect its citizens.

Testing kits.

Some countries have acquired more efficient test kits thereby providing their citizens more reliable test results immediately, while other countries use less efficient kits. This ensures that people get to know their status sooner and can then isolate before infecting others. Unfortunately, South Africa is not one of those countries. Currently, the SA citizens only get to know the results 3 to 4 days after testing, on average. There is a massive backlog in the testing centres and the authorities are battling with high numbers of samples resulting in even more delays in getting the results. Also, it does not help that the private laboratories charge as much as R900 on average to test individuals.

Media has reported cases where some individuals would test negative for the Covid-19 only to be later diagnosed as positive. It remains unclear if it is a case of new infections or failed tests? The conclusion is that tests are not always accurate and the symptoms must be considered when

interpreting the results. Wherever the results are inconclusive, the persons should remain in isolation.

Reinfection after Successful Treatment.

Wuhan has cases of individuals who have tested positive after a successful treatment and recovery. Experts are doubtful if reinfection is possible so soon after recovery, but they say it is too soon to tell. They also believe that these re-infected persons cannot infect others, meaning they are “non-carriers” of the virus.

Myths and Misinformation.

The belief that Africans are immune from being infected by the Covid-19 is untrue. Several Africans have since been tested positive and are showing the symptoms of the Covid-19.

Home Remedies.

As corona belongs to a family of other viruses that cause seasonal flu, some people will survive Covid-19 without showing any symptoms or recover after displaying minimal flu symptoms. Therefore home remedies may help in the symptomatic recovery from mild flu symptoms.

Surfaces and Door Handles.

The virus can survive on table surfaces and door handles for hours, therefore it is imperative to sanitize hands and surfaces to reduce the chances of infection.

Masks.

The N95 mask is recommended to protect both the wearer from infecting others, and vice versa. The masks are recommended in the healthcare setting and in places where a lot of people keep within a short distance from each other. Masks must be changed and safely disposed after a few hours in the high risk setting; and after each isolated patient contact in the healthcare setting.

Social Distancing.

Maintain a 1.5 meter distance to remain safe even from coughed particles of the virus.

Observe Cough Etiquette at all times.

People are called upon to cover their nose and mouth when coughing with a tissue or an elbow to avoid the spread of COVID-19 or any other disease.

Isolation.

Infected individuals may display no symptoms for up to 14 days or may display none throughout their infection period. It therefore is advisable to self-isolate when you are ill or coughing, get tested and only integrate with others when you are certain of negative status result.

Quarantine.

Quarantine refers to a more formal and stricter isolation in a facility for high risk cases. Obey the isolation/quarantine directives and rules.

Lockdown and the Role of the Citizens.

There have been reported instances of individuals who have elected to ignore the directives to quarantine and opted to go on with their lives like all is normal thereby deliberately exposing unsuspecting persons to the infection. The recent cases are that of an infected individual who went on Gauteng tour with German tourists, only to be found by authorities when he eventually fell very ill while their bus had broken down (ENCA News Network, 27 March, 2020).

The other one is that of an individual who had tested positive in Gauteng, but was discovered by authorities in Limpopo on the 28th March, 2020. Another was of a certain lady who neglected to self-quarantine after testing positive. She went ahead with her life and was charged with attempted murder when she was subsequently captured. The lockdown is an effective way to contain such individuals and many others who have never tested; and would unwittingly be spreading the viral infection. It therefore is a necessary containment measure to curb the high number of new infections. Some wrongly look at it as a repressive apartheid déjà vu.

The benefits of lockdown will only be visible at least three weeks from now. This is mainly because over the past two days there has been an increased social interaction and more people crowding at shops for their “lockdown shopping”. Over the course of 14 days from now, new infections will show symptoms, get tested and wait 3-4 days for their test results. That is how the 21 day-lockdown period should be interpreted.

We have to expect a rapid increase in new infections over the next three (3) weeks because of our recklessness over the past two (2) days. Regrettably, the lockdown may have to be extended by a further 2-3 weeks for its intended result to be fully appreciated. Thereafter, this flu
mlungisi@bstmadison.com will start to clear after a few weeks.

Another imminent challenge is that we, as a country, are about to enter a flu season in which there will be more flu cases detected and probably many false scares because the Covid-19 also displays similar flu-like symptoms.

In conclusion, this is not a time to panic. Let us all adhere to the medical advice and government measures; and the lockdown as these are the measures to reduce the number of new infections. Our co-operation will determine how long will the pandemic remain with us. I hope this information equips us to make wise choices now and in the following weeks.

Compiled by:



Dr Mlungisi Dongwe

PAC National Spokesperson on COVID-19.