



Not fighting: Prof Salim Abdool Karim, who co-chairs SA's advisory committee on Covid-19, says differences among scientists 'are the scientific process'.
/Sunday Times/Sandile Ndlovu

Advisers 'doing their best' to keep up with Covid-19 data

● *Differences among scientists not personal, says Karim*

Tamar Kahn
Science & Health Writer

The public needs to understand that the advice from scientists guiding governments' response to the coronavirus pandemic is continuously changing in response to evolving knowledge about the disease, leading epidemiologists advising Sweden and SA agreed on Thursday.

While the governments of the two nations have taken different approaches to the disease, both have faced criticism for their efforts to strike a balance between saving lives and disrupting society.

"It is important to realise that we took decisions from scant data to start with, and many decisions may have been a bit blunt," said Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell.

"We sometimes hit a fly with a hammer. Now we need to be much more precise. Since this is going to be a long-term challenge, we need to make sure we do not hurt our populations more than necessary, since they have suffered quite a lot," he said during a lecture hosted by the National Research Foundation and the Swedish embassy in SA to commemorate the Nobel

prizes, which are being announced this week.

Tegnell is the driving force behind the Swedish government's response to Covid-19, which did not entail a hard lockdown of the kind seen in SA.

Sweden opted for a lighter touch, banning gatherings of more than 50 people and switching to online learning for university students and older teenagers, but retaining face-to-face schooling for younger children. It relied on voluntary guidance to encourage people to work from home and limit their use of public transport.

INTERPRETATIONS

University of KwaZulu-Natal epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim, who co-chairs health minister Zweli Mkhize's advisory committee on Covid-19, said scientists had confronted an unprecedented volume of research on Covid-19, with often conflicting evidence.

"Scientific conclusions are interpretations of evidence with substantial uncertainty. We have begun to understand that we need to communicate much more clearly with the public and in a much more open way about the insecurities of our evidence,

and that we make mistakes – we are human. But when we make mistakes, we self-correct ... we change," he said.

"The public needs to understand differences among scientists are not personal, it is just the scientific process. If we didn't have those differences of opinion we would have group-think," he said.

"In SA it has been completely misunderstood, that the MAC [ministerial advisory committee] is fighting, but that is just the scientific process," he said.

The committee has been at the centre of controversial debates over the government's response to SA's coronavirus epidemic, with several members publicly expressing frustrations at the lack of scientific evidence behind measures such as the tobacco sales ban.

The committee was recently reconstituted by Mkhize, with several of its most outspoken critics relieved of their roles.

The minister has denied he silenced voices of dissent, and told a meeting hosted by the SA Medical Association that the committee had been reshaped to reflect the skills needed at this stage of the epidemic.

kahtn@businesslive.co.za