

'Critical' week ahead

SA's Covid-19 trajectory bucks global trends, but we can't relax yet

THE coming week is "critical" for South Africa's Covid-19 fight, because the number of positive cases that are found during intensive testing will guide the government's next move.

The government is looking at "stopping the small flames" to avoid having a large, uncontrollable fire in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, but the country, at least in the initial phases of the outbreak, is bucking international trends.

Interventions could include encouraging the elderly into a self-isolation until as late as September, to ensure those vulnerable stay away from the virus.

The lockdown could be relaxed or continue to be enforced depending on how the disease is spreading in the coming weeks, and the government is especially looking at how many people are being infected by those already carrying the virus.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, an epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist who is serving as an adviser for the government, delivered a presen-

tation on the spread of the virus in SA.

He warned that once we end the lockdown the public would still be at risk because there is no immunity.

He said South Africa likely cannot escape an exponential spread of the virus. "Our population will be at high risk after the lockdown. We cannot escape this epidemic, not unless South Africa has ... some mojo that protects us that is not present anywhere else in the world."

Karim explained that the difficulty with Covid-19 is that when someone contracts the virus, they become infectious after four to seven days — before they display symptoms.

He said the lockdown has bought us time, and we now have time to flatten the curve. "It has given us time to (hopefully) find new ways to test, or get a vaccine or treatment," he said.

In a wide-ranging and detailed presentation, at a virtual meeting from Durban along with Health Minister Zweli Mkhize and joined by members of the media, healthcare experts, clinicians,

scientists and academics, he said the infection had increased in keeping with global trends until the lockdown.

On the day of the lockdown, the cases plateaued, Karim said. "Our epidemic has a completely unique trajectory."

He said there were three possible reasons: the first could be that South Africa is testing less, or that tests were mainly being done in the private sector and we were therefore not getting a sense of what is happening in poorer areas, or the reduction could be "genuine".

South Africa had dramatically increased testing since the outbreak began, and National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) "sharply increased" its testing in the "townships and the communities".

"So it's unlikely due to not enough testing and it's unlikely because we're not testing poorer areas," he said. It is likely a genuine bucking of the trend.

Karim said the Covid-19 outbreak in SA came in three waves. The first was people who travelled overseas, acquired

the virus, and brought it back. This is coming to an end, however, since the closure of international travel. The second wave were those who came into contact with people who travelled overseas.

The expectation was that these two groups would spread the virus widely inside the country, but that didn't happen.

The third wave is local transmission. In every country other than China where it emerged by jumping from animals to humans, the coronavirus has been brought in by travellers. In South Africa, those travellers were quickly identified and properly quarantined.

Karim said the third wave — internal transmissions — was just not happening in SA as it was in other countries.

Karim said the "reproductive rate" of the infection — that is, how many people each infected person is infecting — is about one per case, which could be the reason for the slower spread here.

"That is why we instituted interventions that led to a situation where people weren't interacting with others. Each in-

fecting person becomes a dead-end. We're not seeing the growth in the disease."

But, Karim said, the government was concerned about Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban where a big outbreak could happen.

The country is moving into the fifth of eight stages of reaction to the pandemic. The first four were education, increasing testing capacity, increasing social distancing and door-to-door testing.

Stage five is to identify hotspots and intervention strategies. Stage six is medical care, like expanding hospital bed numbers and field hospitals. Stage seven is expanding the burial capacity and regulating funerals, and managing psychological and social impact. Stage eight is the ongoing vigilance of the virus.

Mkhize said there are 10 654 "tracers" deployed in the field tracking down those who have unknowingly come into contact with people positive with Covid-19, who have tracked down 4 537 people so far. — News24.