

'We are ready to tackle Covid in 2021'

Professor Abdool Karim: lessons of the past year have given SA the foundation to deal with it

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PROFESSOR Salim Abdool Karim, co-chairperson of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Covid-19, believes the country is in a better position to deal with the pandemic in the year ahead.

Today marks one year since the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in the country.

Abdool Karim, an infectious diseases epidemiologist who is also the director of Caprisa, highlighted key issues relating to the epidemic while speaking at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Nelson R Mandela Medical School yesterday.

Abdool Karim said 2021 would be a different challenge compared to last year, but he was confident that South Africa was in a better position to take on this year.

"I feel the lessons of the past have given us the foundations to deal better with this pandemic in 2021," he said.

Recalling when the first Covid-19 cases were confirmed, Abdool Karim said he had been disturbed and deeply concerned at the time.

"Those patients who got Covid-19 were treated like lepers in some instances. People were worried and scared."

At the time, he said uncertainty and a lack of knowledge about how the virus was transmitted led South Africa into a situation where many of the first patients faced problems.

Abdool Karim said the first Covid-19 patient, from KZN, who tested positive with a mild case of the disease after returning from a holiday in Italy, was very fortunate.

He said the doctor who treated "patient zero" had good Covid-19 procedures already in place. "The doctor wasn't hesitant to see him, care for him, be his doctor and manage him, but some ... other patients have had (a) problem."

Abdool Karim added that the first patient gave many people hope. "He got the disease, had it in a mild form, and he recovered."

Abdool Karim said he had learnt five lessons from last year, including dealing with a threat of this nature seriously and timeously. "You have to make difficult decisions bravely because you have to do what's needed, even if it's unpopular."

He said truthful and proactive communication was important.

Abdool Karim said the Covid-19 response had had its challenges, and mistakes had been made along the way.

He said although there had been some irrational regulations and corruption related to the procurement of personal protective equipment, he had also seen what South Africans were capable of when working together.

"I firmly believe our future lies in our

ability to work together. To understand that to solve this pandemic, we cannot do so if we work in isolation."

Looking ahead, Abdool Karim further explained that South Africa could expect to be dealing with the virus for a few years unless there were technological advances, and ways of dealing with the variant of the virus causing Covid-19 were discovered.

He said the variant had shown that as pressure was placed on the virus, it mutated. The mutation then found a way to bypass a vaccine, resulting in another vaccine being made to deal with the variant. "It is going to take us a longer period to get to a position where we can live lives in a state of normalcy as best we can."

When asked what the likelihood was of South Africa again being placed under a strict lockdown – with people forced to stay at home – Abdool Karim said there would be no need for that because the country now knew what behaviours must be implemented to control the virus.

He added that at first, he could not see a link between the ban on alcohol sales and the virus response. "By the end of level 5, when I first saw the evidence emerging, I began to see the importance of the alcohol (sales ban). Alcohol has nothing to do with the virus, but everything to do with the health system."

Speaking during a dialogue event with the National Press Club last night, Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize said the past year had been tumultuous and there was a lot of work that still needed to be done.

Mkhize thanked all the health workers who had done everything they could to help save the lives of those infected with Covid-19. He also offered his condolences to all the families who had lost loved ones. "I think there's a bit of hope now as we have started the processes of vaccination and we hope that one of these days we can look back and say we can now take control of our lives as we have defeated the virus."

However, he urged the public to continue adhering to health regulations to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Val Boje, chairperson of the National Press Club, named Covid-19 as the 2020 newsmaker of the year and virtually presented the newsmaker award to Mkhize in honour of all those at the forefront of fighting Covid-19 in the past year.

Mkhize said the award was for all South Africans fighting Covid-19 – for the health-care workers who had been fighting the pandemic and all those who have had to endure it. "We accept it on the basis that we all understand that those are the people who are being honoured."



CO-CHAIRPERSON of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Covid-19 and director of Caprisa, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, gets the Johnson & Johnson vaccine against Covid-19 at Netcare St Augustine's Hospital yesterday. | DOCTOR NGCOBO African News Agency (ANA)

A year on, families battle to cope with their loss

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A YEAR after the first case of Covid-19 was reported in South Africa, families who lost loved ones due to the pandemic are still trying to come to terms with their loss.

Kavesh Naidoo, 28, of Hillcrest said he was still "putting the pieces of his life back together" after his mother's death.

Naidoo's mother, Dr Thigamberie Reddy, 56, was a dermatologist and worked at Life Chatsmed Garden Hospital, Life Crompton Hospital and the RK Khan Dermatology Clinic for close to 25 years.

Naidoo, who had been living and working at an ashram in India for the past 10 years, said he returned home to be with his mother last August due to the uncertainty of the pandemic.

"It's just my mum and me and I decided to relocate because I felt during this pandemic anything could happen and I didn't want her to be alone.

"She was extremely passionate about her job and people, a genuinely kind person, very caring towards her patients, and it was evident with the outpouring of community grief," he said.

Naidoo said he and his mother got Covid-19 at the same time but he recovered. He said it had been extremely tough starting over in South Africa and



Dr Thigamberie Reddy

adjusting to life without his mother.

The family of another health-care worker, registered nurse Sister Thembisile Veronica Mathe, 62, from Woodlands, said they were also still adjusting to life without her.

Her daughter, Nkabanhle Mathe, said Thembisile worked in hospitals around the country since 1985, then spent six years working in the UK before returning to Netcare St Augustine's Hospital.

"She was a joyful and energetic person. She loved her job and treated everyone she worked with as family. In her free time she was always with her family. She always went the extra mile for people and always left everyone in the room smiling. She did everything for us, so her passing has been so hard.

She said her other siblings also expe-



Thembisile Mathe

rienced symptoms when Mathe got sick in December. She added that the family were extra vigilant about interacting with people safely.

"Especially during the time of her funeral, we were strict with the number of people who could attend and made sure everyone was wearing masks and had sanitising stations around the house, and we still have sanitising stations even though we don't have visitors."

Nkabanhle said Covid-19 had robbed their family of so much and they were still fearful of it.

"With all the precautions it doesn't mean that you won't catch the virus. It has made us more fearful, because you can have it more than once, and we are worried what will happen if our father gets it," she said.

After fighting for his life, Covid survivor loses twin to virus

MARIANNRIDGE ward councillor Reginald Cloete said he was struggling to cope with the death of his twin sister to Covid-19.

Cloete, who spent almost two weeks battling Covid-19 last year, lost his twin sister to the disease in January.

Cloete, 49, was admitted to hospital in July last year after being unable to breathe on his own, and spent 13 days in the ICU on a ventilator.

Cloete said that while he had recovered, his family were dealt a severe blow with the death of his sister, Ree Cloete, due to Covid-19 in January.

"I am trying to cope with her death, although it's hard because we were twins and we had a strong connection," he said.

Cloete strongly believes that health officials need to monitor hospitals, especially government hospitals, very closely.

He also called on the government to be stricter with the enforcement of safety regulations and punish those who did not adhere to them.

Regarding his health, Cloete said he was very fortunate to have survived Covid-19.

However, he said he was left with bruises and was now on chronic medication for his blood pressure and glaucoma.

"I do have fears of contracting the virus again because having had Covid-19 before does not make me immune," he said.



REGINALD Cloete and his sister Ree.