



**INSIDETRACK:** Dr Yanila Nyasulu, a specialist physician, left, is a central figure in the documentary 'Zero to Zero' co-directed by Prof Leonie Scholtz, right. Epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim calls the documentary "amazing". Pictures: SUPPLIED

'Zero to Zero', an important new documentary highlighting the stories and struggles of front-line South African hospital workers was made by Dr Leonie Scholtz, who had unique access to the heart-wrenching battles in Covid-19 ICU and wards.

# Fly-on-the-wall look at a Covid ward

**BARBARA HOLLANDS**

Having a front seat view of the wave of turmoil, illness and death hospital health workers were slammed with when patients suffering from the Covid-19 pandemic hit a hospital, Professor Leonie Scholtz picked up her camera.

Scholtz, a radiologist and part-time filmmaker, realised that because regular photographers had no access to the front line, she was in a unique position to document the intense stories that were playing out at a Pretoria hospital from the moment it admitted its first coronavirus patients in June 2020.

"When the pandemic started, I immediately realised that this was one catastrophic event where no photographers were allowed. Being a photographer myself, and also having access to the inner sanctum of the front-line, I felt obliged to document it," says Scholtz.

Though the public had seen televised glimpses of Covid ICUs and wards here and overseas, Scholtz wanted to tell the deeper stories of people at the heart of battling the pandemic.

"This was a new war. The trauma and isolation was unknown to those outside hospital. People were told to take photographs off social media and I realised the public would not know the bravery of the health workers. They needed to be saluted. And people needed to know this was not just the 'flu.'"

Scholtz said she wanted to record the isolation Covid-19 patients had to suffer once they were admitted.

"One shouldn't suffer alone and once they were there, their only consolation were the health workers."

Her next step in documenting the bravery, suffering and heartbreak in the Zuid-Afrikaans Hospital (ZAH), a 100-year-old, private, non-profit hospital in Muckleneuk, Pretoria, was to bring co-directors Christa Lategan and Shem Compion on board.

Scholtz says she was able to take her camera into the ER every day because elective procedures had been put on hold, freeing her up to focus on filming.

"A young girl of 14 came in and that was exceptional. I chose to film her because it shows that no-one is exempt from this virus. She had no comorbidities. We needed to show this; that we don't know why some people get sick."

Filming the events as they happened meant the team had no idea how the story would unfold.

"We dealt with people going through real life and death situations, so our focus remained on the human spirit. The constantly



**LIFE AND DEATH:** Professor Leonie Scholtz, a radiologist and part-time filmmaker, realised that because regular photographers had no access to the Covid wards, she was in a unique position to document the passion and pain of the frontline health care workers. Picture: REUTERS / STEVO VASILJEVIC

changing narrative was immensely difficult, but the personal journeys delivered a wonderful and authentic story," says producer Christa Lategan.

When M-Net manager for local productions Kaye-Ann Williams saw a rough clip of the footage, she knew she was looking at something profound.

"This unique access to the front-line was incredible. Everyone has been affected [by Covid-19] in some way, so it was really, really important to humanise what front-line workers go through. It is also an inside look into the calibre of the front-line workers we have. They are world class. I got a lump in my throat when I watched it, but this documentary is also so full of hope."

"When we started filming we thought there would be a peak of three months and then it [the virus] would peter out," says Scholtz. "The title *Zero to Zero* was chosen to represent the first and last patient, but there was never a last patient."

"But we decided not to change the title, because we are still striving for the last patient."

Instead, what was supposed to be a three-month filming project expanded into 15 months as the second, then third wave hit.

"We couldn't stop a story that didn't show the full story."

"All through the first wave there was an

adrenaline rush in the hospital. Then when the second wave came, they were incredibly tired. The second wave was worse — how could we stop filming? Then with the third wave they [front-line workers] became quiet. They were like robots."

Scholtz says without watching the documentary it is difficult to understand the level of stress and heartbreak Covid healthcare workers experience, especially since they become more than just a medical lifeline to patients isolated from their loved ones.

"The patients reveal their lives to their healthcare workers for weeks. And then when he dies, the healthcare worker has to collect his belongings and give them to his family. The PTSD will impact them."

For Dr Yanila Nyasulu, specialist physician and a central figure in *Zero to Zero*, fighting the pandemic on the front-line and losing patients she had developed bonds with, has been almost unbearable. She says it is important the public got to see the heart-wrenching reality health workers experience in Covid wards.

"As a front-line worker this has been exhausting. It has been a physically and spiritually draining experience. It has taken so much away from us as physicians. It is unbearable when we lose a patient because we get so close them."

"We hear a lot about negative experiences people have with healthcare workers and we apologise. We love our patients and fight for them, but sometimes it drains us."

Dr Nyasulu says health workers were sandwiched between patients desperately missing the support of their loved ones and their frantically worried families.

"Loved ones turn to us and take their frustrations out on us. It heightens our anxiety." Worsening the situation are the physical struggles faced by doctors and nurses.

"You can't touch a patient and you are covered head to toe because you could get this deadly virus. We are continuously scared and very hot."

The physician says the vaccine rollout had been a great comfort.

"The one thing that has made this better is the vaccine. Vaccinated patients [who contract Covid-19] now stay for two or three days and go home. They don't get intubated. It has given us such hope that there is an end in sight."

"You will see us laugh, cry and fight in this documentary. It is all for the benefit of the patients. We want them to get better. We want South Africans to survive. If people take the vaccine, it will take the unpleasantness and fear away from all of us."

"Somewhere there is a light at the end of this tunnel. We have to believe it. Let's hope for dawn to break."

*Zero to Zero* also features interviews with various experts, including celebrated epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim.

He says the documentary is amazing. "It is a stark reminder of the preventive measures we need in place and also of the value of vaccines. This movie captures what is a very brutal condition. It makes you suffer so that you can't breathe, but it makes you suffer in isolation. The only people who are there are the healthcare workers and they are not there just to save your lives. It takes us back to the importance of the most fundamental thing — that we are inter-dependent."

"You see things from the lens of being there first-hand. It is like being a fly on the wall."

Karim warns of the possibility of a fourth wave in December.

"If you are going to get infected in the fourth wave, I really hope you are vaccinated because then you are unlikely to need ICU. Because vaccines prevent that."

• The documentary will be broadcast on M-Net Channel 101 on Monday, October 4 at 8.30pm. Visit the M-Net website for show content and join the conversation on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook using #ZeroToZero and #mnet101.