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Page: 9

A year of lockdown

'Fellow South Africans, this morning, Thursday, March 5, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases has confirmed that a suspected case of Covid-19 has tested positive. The patient is a 38-year-old male who travelled to Italy with his wife. They were a part of a group of 10 people and they arrived back in SA on March 1 2020,' Health Minister Zweli Mkhize said on March 5 last year. City Press takes a trip down memory lane to revisit the key happenings which defined the nation's first year with Covid-19

COVID-19 ARRIVES

March 5 2020
Patient zero is confirmed as having tested positive for Covid-19 on his return from a trip to Italy

March 6
Coinciding with the news of the arrival of the pandemic on local shores is the arrival of the first tranche of students from Capricorn FET College in Limpopo who had been studying construction in Henan, China

SA GOES UNDER LOCKDOWN

March 15
President Cyril Ramaphosa declares a national state of disaster, which paves the way for the legislation of a raft of regulations under the Disaster Management Act to limit the movement and gathering of citizens

April
Netcare St Augustine's Hospital in Durban shuts down following an outbreak that would go on to infect 135 patients and staff in total

July 12
Ramaphosa addresses the nation that the anticipated surge has arrived. Along with a reinstated ban on alcohol sales, a new curfew is introduced from 9pm to 4am

October 18
Mkhize, the man leading the country's charge against Covid-19 on the health front, announces that he and his wife tested positive for Covid-19

Mkhize

December 3
Ramaphosa addresses the nation again, noting a resurgence in the Eastern and Western Cape

December 18
The emergence of a new Covid-19 variant (501Y.V2) is announced by Mkhize and a panel of scientists including professors Tulio De Oliveira and Salim Abdool Karim

Professor Salim Abdool Karim

ENTER THE VACCINE

February 1
1 million doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines arrive in SA for the roll-out of the first phase of inoculations in healthcare workers. However, later that week clinical trial results show that the vaccine has no significant efficacy against the new variant

IMMUNITY

March 3
Scientists reveal emerging evidence that those infected with the 501Y.V2 variant may develop immunity against the variant, meaning fewer chances of reinfection, and may also develop immunity against the previous circulating variants and lineages

March 6
Private school Cowan House in Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal, where the two children of patient zero attend school, closes down for the day as the pupils quarantine with their mother at their home. This would be precedent-setting as more schools would close down following suspected and confirmed cases of Covid-19

March 14
114 SA nationals are repatriated from Wuhan, China, where the virus outbreak was first identified in December 2019

Madeleine van Wyk was the Covid-19-related death

March 27
The country begins its first 21-day lockdown

March 27
The first two deaths from Covid-19-related causes are recorded in the Western Cape and SA tips the first 1 000 confirmed cases mark

April 9
Ramaphosa extends the 21-day lockdown for another two weeks

April 27
A delegation of 217 Cuban medical practitioners arrives in the country, bringing in infectious disease specialists to support the local effort in dealing with the pandemic

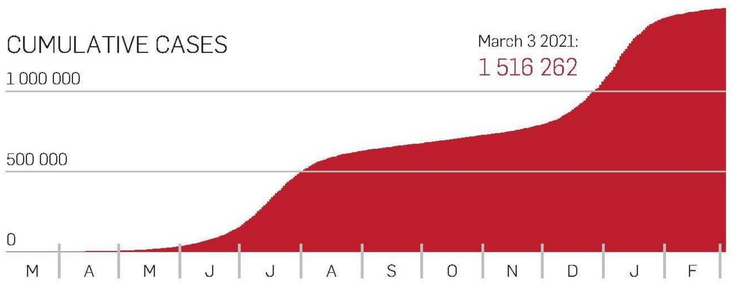
August 15
The first sign of a real reprieve from the pandemic arrives when Ramaphosa confirms that the country will move to a risk-adjusted lockdown level 2

SECOND WAVE

November
The early rumblings of a second wave start to take hold and Mkhize sounds the alarm after daily new cases breach the 3 000 mark on November 20, with more than half of the cases (54.4%) being recorded in the Eastern Cape

A QUIET CHRISTMAS

December 14
Ramaphosa takes to the podium again, announcing the tightening of restrictions in light of the second wave and anticipated mass movement of people between provinces for the festive period



February 17
The Sisonke phase 3b implementation study, using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, begins. Ramaphosa and Mkhize are among the first to get vaccinated alongside healthcare workers

February 27
The second batch of 80 000 Johnson & Johnson vaccines arrives. A total of 500 000 doses will be used for the study

Compiled: Vuyo Mkize

MORNÉ SCHAAP, Graphics24

VACCINE ROLL-OUT: 100 000 DONE, AND COUNTING...

Despite some chaos as healthcare workers reported for their jabs, the **first-access programme** is under way

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After a week of milestones and a few mishaps in the nation's Covid-19 early-access vaccination programme, the big challenge on the horizon is the expansion to phase 2 of the vaccine programme, in which health authorities aim to vaccinate at least 6 million South Africans by June.

According to the department of health's deputy director-general, Dr Anban Pillay, in the coming week, the finalised list of groups prioritised as essential workers to be vaccinated as part of the phase 2 will be released, with the vaccinations due to start being administered by the end of April or, at the latest, early May.

By Friday night this past week, 100 000 healthcare workers around the country had been vaccinated in the Sisonke phase 3b "real-world" implementation study of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, led by the SA Medical Research Council (SAMRC).

This vaccine, which was initially shown to have only 57% efficacy against the 501Y.V2 variant of the virus now dominant in the country, was in fact discovered to have a confirmed 64% efficacy against the variant, according to new data from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

This past Friday marked a year since the first Covid-19 case was identified in the country, and the focus has now shifted to when ordinary citizens can expect to have their Covid-19 jabs administered.

The Sisonke study will vaccinate 500 000 healthcare workers with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as part of the phase 1 inoculation plan, with the rest of the targeted 1.25 million healthcare workers set to receive the Pfizer vaccine.

According to an interim distribution forecast released by the Covax facility this week, at least 117 000 Pfizer vaccines will be supplied to South Africa by the end of the first quarter.

Government has said that it is still in advanced talks to secure 20 million doses of Pfizer's dual-shot vaccine to cover 10 million people, while 11 million commercial doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine have also been secured. This is over and above the 12 million doses the Covax facility will be providing.

SIGNIFICANT CONSTRAINTS GLOBALLY

Stavros Nicolaou, chair of the Business for SA health working group, this week said: "As best as we understand the timelines, remembering that there are significant constraints globally to the supply of vaccines and that timelines are reasonably fluid, in quarter 1 - which lasts until the end of March - we'll have about 700 000 [doses] secured.

"This doesn't mean that they're shots that will be administered. It refers to the stock forecast to arrive in the country. Then, moving to quarter two - which is critical, as it's before winter sets in and with the threat of a third wave of infections - the number moves to 5.3 million doses of landed stock by the end of [June].

"Quarters three and four will give, at a best estimate, another 20 million [doses]," said Nicolaou.

"It [vaccine acquisition and distribution] is a very fluid environment. Phase 1 is the easier one. Things become a little more complex and the scale shifts significantly when you move to phase 2."

This week, vaccination sites were also expanded from 17 to 49 across the country - 32 in public hospitals and 17 in the private sector.

Pillay said the department was aiming to have completed phase 1 vaccinations by the middle of next month.

"By the end of April or early May, at the latest, we'll start phase 2," he said in a webinar on Friday, giving an update on the vaccinations of healthcare workers.

Phase 2 has four sub-groups: essential workers, people in congregant settings, the elderly (older than 60) and those older than 18 who have comorbidities such as diabetes, cancer and HIV.

"There's much debate and lobbying about essential workers and we'll come out with an explicit list of who's 'essential' and who isn't. The ministerial advisory committee is scrolling through that and I know there'll be some people who are unhappy, but the reality is that - given the flow of vaccine doses - it's important that we identify those at highest risk first and those who play an important role in ensuring the wheels of the country turn," explained Pillay.

LIFESAVER A healthcare worker receives the Johnson & Johnson vaccination at the Dr George Mukhari Academic Hospital in Ga-Rankuwa this week PHOTO: ROSETTA MSIMANGO

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MISHAPS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

This week, media reports of private-sector doctors abusing the electronic vaccination data system by fraudulently having their relatives vaccinated cast a shadow over the early-access programme.

Added to that, healthcare workers who were turned away from vaccination sites such as the Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital this week, after being told that they were not on the vaccination lists, shared their frustrations with City Press. Private healthcare workers also claimed to have been turned away from the Milpark and Steve Biko hospitals, despite having voucher numbers showing their registration for a vaccine.

Professor Glenda Gray, CEO of the SAMRC and co-leader of the Sisonke study, explained the kinks in the system.

"We work with the electronic vaccination data system and the local hospitals to come up with an agreed definition of who goes first. So, for example, at Bara [hospital], we work with the hospital's list and we try to prioritise those on it. We try to prioritise those who are patient-facing, no matter whether they're porters, cleaners, nurses, doctors or dieticians. We prioritise those working in intensive care units, Covid-19 wards or high-density, patient-facing areas.

"We've tried to make sure that people who get vaccinated come with their registration number to prove they're working in those settings. We know there have been loopholes in the first round, but sites are now becoming stricter to ensure that only critical workers are vaccinated first."

As the vaccine becomes available for more people around the country during phase 2, Gray says an appointment system will be critical to ensure that sites do not run out of vaccines.

The department of health came under fire this week from MPs for allegedly misrepresenting the phase 3b study as an actual national roll-out, when, in fact, the national programme had not yet begun.

Going for the jugular, EFF MP Naledi Chirwa accused the department of lying, but she was called to order to withdraw the slur.

"What do we do with an executive that lies to the portfolio committee? You lie in the news, you lie in your statements. You're liars! Today [Friday], you're coming here to manage the situation because you've been caught in a web of lies and you're citing non-disclosure agreements as the reason, creating immunity [to those] lies," Chirwa declared.

Deputy Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the current roll-out to health workers was legally regarded as an expanded study, while the full registration process for commercial use of the vaccine was under way with the SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (Sahpra).

Gray explained the classification of the study: "I think there's been some confusion about it. We're in a space in South Africa where we know the vaccine works and are still expecting the [full] registration of it at Sahpra.

"When we started the study, Johnson & Johnson had applied for emergency use of the vaccine with the FDA. That happened a week into this programme. We call it 'phase 3b' because we're waiting for the registration of the vaccine in the country, so this is an early-access programme - not an official roll-out."

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