

'Surge in cases from start of lockdown'

● Rising numbers due to improved data from screening, top adviser says

Tanya Farber

Prof Salim Abdool Karim says SA's spike in Covid-19 cases over the past week comprises infections from the beginning of lockdown.

Abdool Karim, who has quickly become a household name in SA, is the government's chief adviser on Covid-19.

He impressed the country on Easter Monday when he laid out its strategy to tackle the coronavirus.

Yesterday, he provided more insights into the spread of the disease during a webinar conducted through the Centre for the Programme of Research in SA, where he is a scientific director.

In the webinar, Abdool Karim said positive laboratory results pertained to an infection that occurred, on average, two weeks before.

What was being seen now in terms of the spike was a result of improved data from the rollout of the community health-care worker programme, he said.

"The first two weeks of cases that we see after lockdown actually occurred before the lockdown.

"The third week of lockdown is probably our best indicator of infections that occurred straight after the lockdown," he said.

The initial drop was not because of the lockdown, but the declaration of a state of disaster which resulted in measures including schools being closed, physical distancing and restrictions on airports.

He said this phase "had a marked impact that took our daily number of cases to quite a low level".

"Now this week what we are seeing is the result of us initiating a community health



UNDERSTANDING THE OUTBREAK: Professor Salim Abdool Karim says SA's spike in Covid-19 cases is a result of improved data from the rollout of the community health-care worker programme

Photograph: TREVOR SAMSON

worker programme with more than a million screenings having taken place," he said.

"When you compare the number of cases in the third week to the second week, we are not comparing apples with apples.

"Now we have apples and oranges.

"It's too simplistic a way to look at data just to focus on the spike," he said.

Abdool Karim said the virus had an edge over "anything we could do in a population with absolutely zero antibodies".

"Everyone is a sitting duck. Everyone is at risk.

"You have to treat it as a condition that is going to affect everyone and you need to put in measures that deal with that kind of approach," Abdool Karim said.

"If we want to really grapple with this particular virus, it is not a condition we should underestimate."

Abdool Karim said other

countries had underestimated "the enemy".

"As in the art of war, one of the biggest flaws is to underestimate the enemy.

"We should not do that with this virus," he said.

"Some people thought they could outwit this virus, that you didn't need to really tackle it head-on, and that you could either try to achieve herd immunity by allowing natural infection — particularly in young people in whom it is quite mild — or you take partial protection measures while allowing a spread to occur while protecting the elderly.

"Countries have tried those and have found those strategies haven't really been effective.

"Nobody ever thought we would need to deal with something like this."

Abdool Karim said at least the Soccer World Cup in 2010 had given SA an edge.

"At the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR),

we put in place an amazing ops centre for the World Cup.

"It is a wall full of big television screens showing maps of the country, where police stations are and so on.

"What we now had to do was add data into the system of where the cases are.

"That's where the community health workers come in, using cellphone technology.

"The community health-care workers have to enter information on a cellphone, which sends the locations to the ops room.

"The location pings at the CSIR. That is how we know where we have covered the country with our screening.

"That is how we are going to tackle this problem — we are going to tackle it using data.

"We will have knowledge about where we are going at our fingertips.

"There will come a time that we can't, but our hotspot strategy will go some way to flattening that curve."

Abdool Karim said it was not yet known how the virus affected those with HIV.

On all other aspects of the virus, the ministerial advisory committee made up of 51 experts had been "having conference calls with our colleagues in China" as they were "four months ahead of us", he said.

Those colleagues said in all the thousands of patients they had studied, only one had both HIV and Covid-19 and there was nothing to report, so this information was not helpful.

"We are going to have to study it here.

"Because our first wave occurred in a demographic that doesn't have much HIV, we didn't see much co-infection, but in the second wave we see co-infection," Abdool Karim said. — *TimesLIVE*