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NEWS 

How Covid-19 reversed gains in TB control by about a decade

Experts say despite inroads made in controlling the disease, SA's ability to find, treat and cure TB has dropped since the pandemic pervaded the world

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Prof Kogje Naidoo, deputy director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA and head of its HIV-TB treatment research programme, at the clinic with a patient.

Image: Caprisa

The Covid-19 pandemic has reversed gains made against tuberculosis (TB) — one of SA's main killer infectious diseases — by nearly a decade.

Experts say in spite of inroads made in controlling the disease, SA's ability to find, treat and cure TB has dropped in the two years the pandemic pervaded the world.

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Prof Kogie Naidoo, deputy director of the Durban-based Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA (Caprisa) and head of its HIV-TB treatment research programme, told TimesLIVE Premium this week an increase in SA's TB mortality has been reported but is yet to be quantified.

Last week Naidoo addressed the seventh annual TB conference in Durban, saying the Covid-19 pandemic put TB on the back foot.

"For 10 years we have seen a steady decline in deaths for TB as we are diagnosing earlier. But the Covid-19 pandemic has affected us badly. For the first time we have 100,000 additional deaths globally in 2021 alone.

"In SA our ability to diagnose and find TB and the number of people presenting to health services to get tested went down.

IN NUMBERS:

Compared with 2019, tuberculosis case detection in 2020 was reduced by 18% globally

By May, 2020, tuberculosis testing in SA had decreased by more than 50%

There are eight countries that hold 66% of the global burden of TB, which include India, South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa

SA is among the eight countries and holds 3.3% of the burden

"There is increased rates of TB mortality, but we have not quantified it.

"It has been reported that there has been an increase, but whether it is an increase of one or 10%, that data has not been released yet by the national health department," Naidoo said.

In a recent research article published in the Lancet Respiratory Journal, University of Cape Town pulmonology experts found that the decline in the incidence of TB globally in 10 years "was abruptly reversed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which in many parts of the world has resulted in a substantial reduction in TB testing and case notifications, with an associated increase in mortality, putting global tuberculosis control back by roughly 10 years.

"Compared with 2019, TB case detection in 2020 was reduced by 18% globally (a decrease from 7.1 to 5.8-million cases) and by up to 24% in the 10 worst-affected countries with a high tuberculosis burden. Huge reductions in notified cases have been seen in the Philippines, Indonesia, SA and India."

"Previously unpublished data from SA's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) show substantial reductions in testing and case detection nationwide, coinciding with each wave of Covid-19 and the national lockdown.

"By May, 2020, testing in SA had decreased by more than 50% compared with the previous year.

“The full impact of the Omicron wave in SA and other tuberculosis-endemic countries is unknown but likely to be negative for TB services. The 2021 WHO global tuberculosis report estimated about a 15% reduction in the number of people treated for drug-resistant TB and a 21% decrease in people receiving preventive therapy for latent TB infection globally,” the article said.

Naidoo says South Africans are “hyper aware” of Covid-19 symptoms but not TB, which includes night sweats, persistent cough and weight loss.



People stopped thinking about TB during the Covid-19. It took focus, resources, money, time and effort.

- Prof Kogie Naidoo, Caprisa

“If you visit any hospitals in KwaZulu-Natal, TB is the most common cause for comorbidities or admission.

“People stopped thinking about TB during the Covid-19. It took focus, resources, money, time and effort.

“TB and HIV have not gone away. Our patients are still sick and in need.”

There are eight countries that hold 66% of the global burden of TB, which include India, South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

SA is among the eight countries and holds 3.3% of the burden.

“We have the reputation of being number one in the world for HIV and for TB and HIV co-infection. That is the enormity of the problem,” said Naidoo.

Naidoo, through Caprisa, is part of global studies to find, prevent and better treat TB.

“A paper was published in the New England Journal of Medicine to show a vaccine that was effective in preventing people with latent TB infection from getting TB disease and that was people living with HIV.

“We rarely get vaccines for people living with HIV and they are at the greatest risk to progress to TB and to die from it. It was a 54% efficacy.

“We are now doing a bigger study to show whether it’s effective and whether we can reproduce those findings. If we are able to reproduce those findings, a large study involving 25,000 people is being planned to start next year in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia.”

Naidoo and her team have joined scientists from the UK, Uganda and Indonesia in an effort to improve the treatment of TB meningitis, where 56% of patients die.

“There are two areas of TB that contribute disproportionately to death including TB meningitis, which is a huge problem.



Incidence of TB globally in 10 years was abruptly reversed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which in many parts of the world has resulted in a substantial reduction in tuberculosis testing and case notifications.

- University of Cape Town pulmonology experts

“We have grouped with scientists from Oxford University, Uganda and Indonesia to alter the dose of drugs with the hope that we will improve the penetration of the drugs into the brain, treat the TB meningitis and save lives. That study has started and we have another three years to go.

“We are working in a state hospital in KZN.”

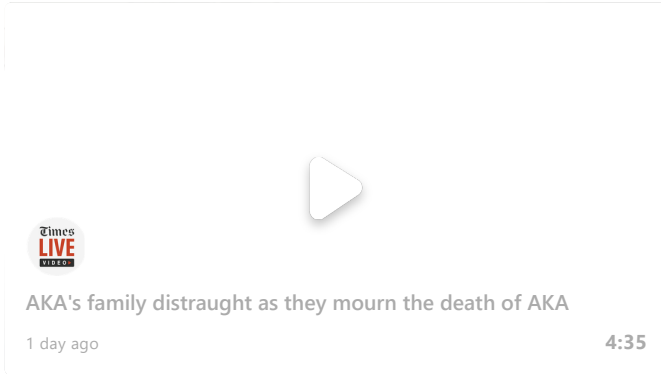
Naidoo is also leading an international consortium in a study to optimise treatment for drug-resistant TB, which is also a big challenge in SA.

“In SA we hold a big burden of drug resistance TB, we are among one of 30 high-burden countries of the world when it comes to drug resistance TB.

“We would wait 20 to 42 days to get a resistance profile on a sputum test. We have partnered with the World Health Organisation’s collaborating centre, FIND, and they have procured the diagnostic test for us free.

“We have deployed them in public health facilities. The diagnostic test provides results of resistance to TB drugs in less than an hour ...”

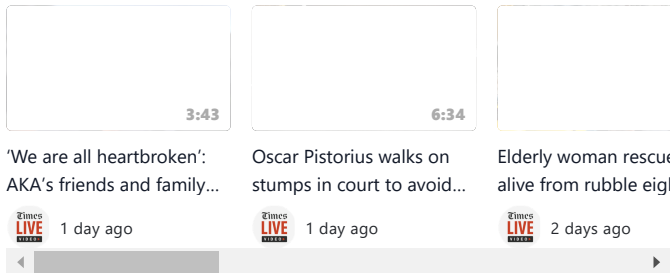
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