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# GOVERNMENT DECISIONS

## While the response to Covid-19 affects livelihoods in adverse ways, it is informed by **solid scientific research** that seeks to prevent otherwise guaranteed fatalities

VUYO MKIZE
vuyo.mkize@citypress.co.za

On Monday night, he had millions of South Africans glued to their screens, collectively eating out of the palm of his hand.

After the presentation on the Covid-19 coronavirus epidemic in South Africa by Salim Abdool Karim - a professor, clinical infectious diseases epidemiologist and global industry heavyweight who has for years led from the front in scientific contributions to HIV prevention and treatment - there was a palpable shift in the public's understanding of what informed some of government's decisions around its response.

"When [Health Minister Zweli Mkhize] felt that we should have a public engagement, I think he had a sense that the public should be taken into our confidence and they should be made to see some of the backroom stuff that we do.

"I think he wanted people to have a clearer sense of how the scientists are providing information, and if it's useful to the politicians maybe it's useful to the public," Karim told City Press this week.

But he could not have imagined the overwhelming response and keen engagement the South African public would have to the presentation.

"I was taken aback ... I mean, I made the explanation simpler than I would normally do, but I was quite taken aback by how many people followed it," he said with a chuckle.

Karim, who is a director at the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA (Caprisa) and is Caprisa professor of global health in epidemiology at Columbia University in the US, is also pro-vice-chancellor of research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

He is ranked among the world's most cited scientists by citation index Web of Science and serves on the boards of several journals.

Over and above the many roles he serves, Karim's latest major task is being chair of the ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19, on which he serves with about 50 other scientists, epidemiologists, virologists and researchers.

He quickly quashed any notion that his adulation at the moment meant that he was the central figure behind the decision-making in the country's response to Covid-19.

"I think there is confusion; I am not leading anything. I'm just the person giving the advice. I don't work for the government, I make no decisions. I simply provide information, that's all, and I'm very happy to do so," he said.

The pandemic has seen many South Africans clamouring for any bits of new information they can get, as government decisions affect all aspects of their livelihoods.

Little is known about the virus since it was first reported as a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan in China's Hubei province last year.

Its causative pathogen has been identified as a novel coronavirus identified as Sars-Covid-2, which has infected more than 2 million people worldwide leading to more than 140 000 deaths so far.

South Africa has not been spared by the rapidly spreading virus. Just over a month since the first patient was identified in KwaZulu-Natal on March 5, more than 2 600 people have been confirmed as infected and more than 40 have died.

However, the virus has a high recovery rate, with at least 903 people having recovered from the respiratory infection in South Africa.

Karim says Covid-19 is different from any other epidemic he has worked on, including HIV.

"Perhaps the most prominent way in which it is different is the rapidity in which things are moving. Things change on an hourly basis and we're sort of always on the back foot.

"We receive multiple requests from the health minister on things to respond to. We put teams together, collect information and provide advice based on the best science available. And we try do it on a rapid turnaround of within 12 to 24 hours so that the ministry has the right information and can make the right decisions when it needs to," he explained.

Karim says South Africa is fortunate to have politicians who, this time around, actually value and want scientific input on which to base their decisions.

"When I look at what's going on in other countries [referring to US President Donald Trump's response to the pandemic], I think back a short while ago when we were in the same boat as the scientists further afield, trying to ensure that scientific information would be dominant in the response to HIV/Aids and we had politicians who thought otherwise.

"The tables have turned now; the politicians want the science, they are asking for it and are saying: 'Give us the best approach.'

"Our job sometimes is to look at all the bad options and give the least bad one, saying: 'Of all the bad options we have, this one is probably the one we should go with. Here's the scientific evidence for it.'"

### BUBBLES BURST

While explaining South Africa's "unique epidemic trajectory" - in part because of the proactive interventions by government, such as imposing a travel ban as well as a nationwide lockdown, which has seemingly worked in curtailing community transmission - Karim didn't mince his words on what was still to come.

In his address he said South Africa couldn't escape the worst of Covid-19 and he reiterated this in an interview on Friday.

"There's a difficult truth we have to reckon with. We can't escape this bullet. We can't find a path to avoid the problems [that come with the pandemic]. We just have to accept we will get it and have bought some time with the lockdown. I think that is probably the basis to work with, that it's coming and we need to prepare. We need to take the worst-case scenario and prepare for that. If it's not as bad as it was in the US or Italy, then we are lucky, but we need to plan on that basis," he stated.

Karim explained that the first wave of infections was from travellers, the second from those who had been in contact with travellers and the third was widespread community transmission. In explaining why South Africa was not following the expected epidemic curve as seen in other countries, he said the introduction of measures such as hand-washing, social distancing and a lockdown were important in making each infected person a "dead end" for transmission.

As government considers easing lockdown restrictions, community transmission levels will be the all-important guide in response to the virus.

"If passive cases [patients who seek medical help] are 90 or more on average per day, we will have to continue the lockdown. If we see cases falling to between 45 and 89, then we look at active cases [those found by health workers]. If [the ratio of] these is 1:1 000 [one patient in every 1 000 people] or below, then we can ease the lockdown," he said on Monday.

But Karim cautioned against ending the lockdown too abruptly, as this would run the risk of undoing all the good that has been done.

He said they should soon know if their community transmission interpretation was accurate.

On Thursday night, Mkhize released that there had been an increase in cases from 2 506 on Wednesday to 2 605 that night.

"I'm still working on that, still waiting on complete data to make an analysis. When all that comes in, we will inform the minister on what the data are saying and we will deal with that when data are available."

On his opinion on whether we could expect to be returning to our favourite pastimes before year-end, Karim said coyly and with a chuckle: "I have no idea. I don't make those decisions, thankfully. It's my job to give advice, plus government receives advice from many different people such as economists and others. Its decisions aren't simply based on medical reasons. I have no idea, sorry."

### TALK TO US

**Are you reassured by the utterances of science experts as regards the response to Covid-19? Does it affect how you conduct yourself in the fight against the virus?**
SMS us on 35697 using the keyword EXPERT and tell us what you think. Please include your name and province. SMSes cost R1.50. By participating, you agree to receive occasional marketing material

**EXPERT ADVICE** Epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist Salim Abdool Karim

# Bacher's emotional call to Hansie's father

HENDRIK HANCKE
news@citypress.co.za

The tears flowed this week when Dr Ali Bacher (77) made an emotional, olive-branch telephone call to Hansie Cronjé's father, Ewie.

Bacher, the former head of Cricket SA, told City Press' sister publication Rapport this week that the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic had forced him to do some deep introspection.

"Over the past while, I've been thinking about the past and about my life very hard ... and the one thing that I had to fix was my relationship with Hansie's father, Ewie," Bacher said.

Ewie (80), who is seriously ill with stomach cancer, was too weak to speak during the interview, but he made it known that he considered the hatchet buried.

Hansie's sister, Hester Parsons, said Bacher's gesture meant a lot to the Cronjé family.

"Mamma held the phone against Pappa's ear and Pappa lay there and listened. She said Pappa was extremely emotional and sad. Afterwards, he explained to her that he wished he could respond. He so badly wanted a conversation with Ali and to be able to answer him.

"His call meant so much to my father and my mother and to our family, but especially for Pappa. Ali said he was sorry, and my father forgave him. You know, a friendship that long..."

Parsons became overwhelmed and the tears began flowing as she trailed off.

Bacher said he and his wife, Shira, returned from Israel at the beginning of last month after attending a family wedding.

"Because of the coronavirus, we immediately went into isolation at home," said Bacher.

In the five weeks that Bacher and his wife have spent at home, he has thought deeply about his life.

He said that when Hansie was banned from cricket for life back in 2000, his more than 20-year friendship with Ewie came to a standstill.

"My birthday is on May 24. Before Hansie's suspension, Ewie called me every year or sent me a message. It just stopped, and I mistakenly assumed he was angry with me. We have not spoken for the last 20 years, and with the date approaching and the fear of the virus hanging in the air, I felt I had to do something," said Bacher.

He called Hansie's older brother, Frans.

"I wanted to know if it would be appropriate for me to phone his father. Frans called me back and said the family has no problem with me, and that I could phone Ewie. However, there was a problem. Ewie is very sick and cannot speak any more."

> Over the past while, I've been thinking about the past and about my life very hard ... and the one thing that I had to fix was my relationship with Hansie's father, Ewie

Bacher's voice began to crack with emotion as he continued.

"I phoned Ewie's wife, San-Marie. She wrote down everything I said and Ewie could read it. Every time she just said: 'Ewie is nodding, he's nodding.' And that's how we sorted things out," said Bacher.

Bacher said his friendship with Ewie dated back to the early 1980s.

"I took over the reins at Transvaal in 1981 and at South African cricket in 1991, I think. It was during that time that I met Mr Bloemfontein, Ewie Cronjé, and our shared love of cricket quickly made us close friends. I was also very close to his family."

When Hansie, the Proteas cricket player and captain, appeared on the scene, Bacher and Ewie became even closer.

"My big passion has always been cricket development. That is why I had already started doing it in the townships in 1986. I can honestly tell you that, in the last 30 years, no other South African captain shared that vision as much as Hansie," said Bacher.

He said Hansie was always ready to help with that, no matter how inconvenient his request.

"I remember that I called him once, two days before a big match in Bloemfontein, and asked him if he could take the team to the township for a clinic. I told him there was no pressure, and if he couldn't take them, I would understand. Hansie didn't ask questions and simply made time for it."

Bacher said the fall of Hansie, and his later death, hit him very hard.

"After the Ewie telephone call, I can tell you with an open heart that my Hansie page is clean. I will never forget how Hansie called me after the now deceased [United Cricket Board president] Percy Sonn said on record that Hansie may never play cricket again, not even on the beach. Hansie was so heartbroken. His remorse was so overwhelming," said Bacher.

He said that, although Hansie admitted to his mistakes, his lifetime ban from the sport was something that rubbed South Africans up the wrong way.

"People were furious at me. Almost the entire country turned on me. And it wasn't my decision, or even a South African cricket decision. It came directly from the International Cricket Council."

Hansie died in a plane crash in June 2002. His death came as a major shock, said Bacher.

"After his death, things were very difficult. There was a lot of speculation about dirty tricks and tampering with the aircraft, but it simply wasn't possible that anyone with sinister intentions could have known that Hansie would be on that aircraft. He decided at the last moment to board the cargo plane because all passenger flights had been cancelled due to the bad weather in Johannesburg," said Bacher.

Hansie's funeral reopened old wounds.

"There were stories in the media that Ewie did not want any cricket officials at the funeral. So I phoned Ewie, and, the true gentleman that he is, he said I was welcome to go.

"Me and the then minister of sport, Ngconde Balfour, arrived at Grey College [Hansie's former school, where the funeral was held] at the same time on that horrible day. A whole crowd of local people were waiting for me outside. Whether they wanted to assault me or just verbally abuse me I don't know, but the minister's bodyguards intervened and prevented trouble."

When it comes to the match-fixing, Bacher forgave Hansie long ago.

"History will record that Hansie did a terrible thing. He went in the wrong direction and there is nothing one can say or do to change that, even if you wish you could. But he was a good person and he loved cricket.

"I am so glad that I phoned Ewie. We all make mistakes. Some mistakes are more serious than others, but we have to forgive each other and we have to learn from those mistakes. You can go to bed angry, but then you have to sort the thing out the next day. It is not healthy to leave something like this for 20 years," said Bacher.

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