

#DAY13LOCKDOWNSA

Prioritising the health and safety of health workers:

The real epicentre of humanity

by

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Yesterday was World Health Day, a day for us to put the spotlight on the importance of health, and in particular to celebrate health workers throughout the world. Over the last two months with the rapid spread of the coronavirus all over the world, and in particular in the countries in which the numbers increased at a rapid rate, such as China, Italy, Spain, USA and UK it became clear that health workers are at the centre of the coronavirus pandemic. First countries such as China were labelled as the epicentre of the virus, and then the city of Wuhan became the specific epicentre in China. Globally the epicentre then moved to Italy, with Spain and the United States, and more recently the United Kingdom and France also became some of the most infected countries in terms of virus infections and deaths. It appears as if the situation has improved considerably in China, and the lockdown was lifted in Wuhan yesterday. The USA has become the country moving up the fastest, with New York now the epicentre in America. In South Africa Gauteng has been referred to as the epicentre, with the Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal (KZN) following in terms of the number of infections, although KZN has recorded the highest number of deaths according to the Department of Health.

In the countries hardest hit by the spread of Covid-19, it is evident that health workers are the people who are really at the epicentre of Covid-19 in their countries, districts and cities. Sadly, many of them were also infected and those who could not recover also died, despite all their efforts in saving the lives of others. In some of these countries, it is clear that the virus has spread so rapidly that the health systems can no longer cope with the crisis. In extreme cases, it appears as if the health system has collapsed in certain places. In Africa, with its weak health systems, there is a serious threat to the health systems of several African countries collapsing if the spread of the pandemic cannot be reversed.

As Angela Mack, a Marketing Manager and Strategist from New York reminded as yesterday on Twitter, healthcare workers include more than doctors and nurses. All employees working in health facilities are risking their lives – nursing aids, cleaning staff, cafeteria workers, respiratory therapists, pharmacists, social workers and all other employees making a hospital function effectively. Also think of our office and finance workers, supply chain staff and HR professionals, they all play a key role in making the health centre work. In fact, the very first person at risk is your receptionist and security officer who is literally at the frontline of the building, and our paramedics and ambulance workers out in the streets. No single health worker is exempt from the virus. Admittedly, health workers should also apply their training and take the necessary precautions themselves. However, they cannot do so if their employers are not managing the risk proactively. It is the duty of all health employers to provide their staff with the necessary resources and support.

The Department of Health in South Africa is concerned that the health system will not be able to cope with the crisis. The Minister of Employment and Labour, Thulas Nxesi has made it clear that both the private sector and government departments must be compliant with the Disaster Management Act and its regulations, in addition to relevant employment and safety legislation, in particular the Occupational Health and Safety Act. This means that there is a duty on employers to protect their employees from health and safety risks, including hygiene risks such as the Covid-19 virus. The provision of personal protective equipment, as well as preventative measures at hospitals and clinics to prevent the spread of the virus is of utmost importance. Doctors and nurses have high exposure to the virus by virtue of their daily interactions with infected patients. Moreover, they return to their homes after their shifts, and then also expose their families to the risk of infection.

Yesterday the Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize tweeted that 66 people tested positive at the St Augustine Netcare hospital in Durban. Of these 66 people, 48 are staff members of the hospital. It was decided to consider closing sections of the hospital. Imagine if we reach a stage when several hospitals are closed if the risk becomes too high when too many staff members have been infected by the virus. Also think about the impact of increased periods of sick leave taken by health care workers, in addition to staff shortages and overworked health workers. We now need a national, provincial and dedicated programme at each health site to proactively prevent the spread of the virus at health facilities, with a specific focus on health workers. Drastic measures are needed while time is still on our side. But time will run out soon when thousands of people are admitted to hospitals all over the country.

If we don't protect our health workers over the short term, we will see the adverse impact thereof over the medium term, and eliminate any prospect of the long-term survival of the health system. If we allow the health system to be destroyed, government can forget about the National Health Insurance Scheme. We need to realise that our own future as healthy citizens is threatened if we don't protect our health workers. Our own survival is dependent on the survival of health workers.

In the light of the above, the National Education, Health and allied Workers' Union (Nehawu) instituted legal action against the Health Minister to be heard in the labour court today. The union has accused health departments of forcing health workers to do their work without the necessary protective equipment and thereby endangering their lives and that of their patients. Protective equipment includes face masks and shields, gloves, gowns, aprons, hair covers, respiratory protection and goggles, among others (The Star and SA Labour Bulletin, 7 April 2020).

Although health workers have appreciated all efforts and messages of support, thanks and encouragement from the public, their response was consistent all over the world during these days of national lockdowns: Stay at home. Our behaviour as ordinary citizens, or rather lack of responsible behaviour, have contributed to their workload, and if the number of patients keep on increasing at such a rapid rate, they will soon be totally overwhelmed.

While celebrating health workers during World Health Day, we are again reminded of the importance of our health. No other event has put the spotlight more on our health than the coronavirus pandemic. As a people we have to be honest with ourselves and admit that we have not prioritised our health as a nation and a global community the way we should have done. Covid-19 is changing all of that. Perhaps we underestimated the important role of the World Health Organisation, national health systems, our provincial health facilities, and ultimately our health workers and the key role all of us as ordinary citizens are playing to make the health system work. As individuals we are all responsible for either preventing the spread of the virus, or for spreading the virus. We are not only putting the lives

of others at risk with our behaviour, by infecting health workers, we accelerate and multiply the damage we cause to the demise of the health system and the health and safety of our people.

Now is the time to show that we really care for health workers and prioritise their health and safety. In fact, it is long overdue. Their employee wellness should be the top priority of government and hospital management in both the private and public sectors. Their physical, financial and mental health is the key for the effective treatment of infected patients. It does not help us in any way if we classify health workers as essential workers and then we don't treat them as if they are essential. Health workers are the real epicentre of humanity in the coronavirus pandemic, wherever they are. If we don't look after them, there will be no health workers to look after us. We can lock down the economy, but we cannot lock down hospitals. That will be the end for all of us.

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