

#DAY27 LOCKDOWNSA

Health at Work: From Cold to Cancer to Corona

by

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The Coronavirus crisis highlighted the importance of health in society and indeed the workplace. The biggest value of the lockdown has been our national conversation on health. However, and understandably so over the lockdown period, most discussions in the media, society and the workplace are about the coronavirus crisis or Covid-19 virus only. When an employee has TB, cancer, diabetes, Covid-19 or any other illness, we have a responsibility as good employers to take care of our employees and to support them in a responsible manner. In today's article I would like to challenge the current reactive approach to health issues at work and to start thinking about health in a more proactive, holistic and integrated manner affecting workers and the workplace.

Most of us are affected by the common cold, flu, sinus or other illnesses, especially during the winter flu season in South Africa. We need to consider a more holistic focus on health at work in helping us to address the three C's: Cold, Cancer and Corona. And in between these three C's there are a number of other health issues to focus on in the workplace.

I want to take us back to the 1980's when the HIV/AIDS crisis became a centre point of discussion all over the world. Unlike coronavirus, Africa was the continent hardest hit by HIV/AIDS, but several African countries such as Uganda and South Africa developed progressive national HIV/AIDS campaigns, so much so that they have been praised world-wide for their efforts to control the spread and impact thereof. At Stellenbosch University, we even have a Post-Graduate Diploma and Master's degree programme on HIV/AIDS Management to assist companies to manage these health programmes. This programme is running for two decades already. So if there are any people who think that we will reach the end of the Covid-19 crisis at the end of the lockdown, it is evident that this pandemic will not disappear anytime soon. With Covid-19, Africa is the last continent in which the virus has spread, yet it is again predicted that most African countries will not be able to cope if masses of people are infected, given the reality of weak national health systems.

A focus on employee health should be part of an overall employee wellness strategy and that it is essential for employers of choice to include all health issues, including cancer and coronavirus as an important employee health priority. The reality is that according to Addi Lang from the Forever Changed Cancer Programme at least 10% of your employees will get cancer, and the other 90% will have family members or friends with cancer. Hence, 100% of your workforce is affected by cancer. And while less than 1% of your current workforce may be infected by the Covid-19 virus, we are only talking about Covid-19 given the pandemic facing all of us.

Two years ago, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced during the State of the Nation Address on 16 February 2018 that South Africa will embark on a National Cancer Programme. At that time, health experts and cancer patients were encouraged that this national programme of raising awareness and

educating people about the imperative of dealing with cancer would make a huge contribution to addressing the issue of cancer in a more co-ordinated way. Unfortunately, we have not seen the results of this programme. In fact, cancer is so important, it is a matter of life and death.

According to cancer statistics presented by the Forever Changed Cancer Campaign, 14% of men and 13% of women in South Africa are at risk of getting cancer. Thus, if you have 1000 employees at your company, at least 130 of them will be affected by cancer. If not today, sometime in future. Moreover, very few of us do not know either a friend or family member who has cancer. Therefore, cancer affects all of us at the workplace.

The National Human Resource Management Standard on Employee Wellness was developed by the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP), the professional and quality assurance body for Human Resource Management. It defines employee wellness as follows:

Employee wellness is a strategy to ensure a safe and healthy work and social environment is created and maintained, together with individual wellness commitment that enables employees to perform optimally while meeting all health and safety legislative requirements and other relevant wellness good practices in support of the achievement of organisational objectives.

Source: SABPP (2014). National HR Standards.

The SABPP definition of employee wellness provides a clear approach for a professional employee wellness programme in an organisation. All wellness issues, whether TB, HIV/AIDS, listeriosis, stress, alcoholism or other forms of substance abuse, hypertension, epilepsy, internet addiction, safety, financial planning, cancer and Covid-19 fall within the scope of this definition. Regarding the Covid-19 virus, the Health Minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize has consistently highlighted the impact of vulnerable groups, especially employees with other illnesses. Ultimately, all employees are affected by wellness issues and their health should be prioritised in an integrated way. It does not help an employer if an employee is physically very fit, but suffers from financial distress or a mental health problem. A company's wellness strategy should be holistic in addressing all these matters of employee wellness and focus on specific health issues.

Over the past month, President Ramaphosa has displayed government's commitment to address the coronavirus in a co-ordinated way. His significant financial package announced last night is a visible expression of government's support in dealing with the crisis at a national level. Whether all these programmes will have the desired effect, remains to be seen.

A key focus of the campaign addressing Covid-19 at work and society is about being more proactive and where possible, preventative in our behaviour and actions regarding employee health. The whole focus of the lockdown was on prevention of the spread of the virus, and to a great extent this effort was successful, despite several challenges experienced along the way.

I want to suggest that the acronym CORONA guides our thinking and focus going forward in prioritising employee health in a more integrated manner in the workplace:

C = Care – We have to care for our employees and their family members;
O = Openness – We have to be open in raising awareness about health at work, including prevention;
R = Responsibility – We need to take responsibility for health and our own lives;
O = Occupational hygiene – We need to integrate personal hygiene with occupational hygiene;
N = Nutrition – We need to focus on the right diet and nutrition to build a healthy workforce;
A = Action – We need to drive and implement clear actions.

In addition, here are some practical guidelines for companies in prioritising health in future:

- Convert your short-term Covid-19 Committee into a Health Governance Structure;
- Strengthen health programmes as part of your employee wellness strategy;
- Promote health awareness and start conversations about health in the workplace;
- Develop a specific programme on hygiene at work;
- Form dedicated teams or support groups around health priorities such as cancer, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and coronavirus;
- Analyse health needs and identify health risks in your organisation;
- Formulate specific plans to address health risks in your business;
- Advise your employees about good nutrition and a healthy diet;
- Develop proactive health programmes with a specific focus on fitness for employees;
- Elevate the role of the Employee Wellness Manager in the organisation;
- Celebrate all health and fitness achievements by staff such as recoveries and performances on the sport field, including parkruns;
- Acquire specialist health support, such as occupational health and nursing services;
- Integrate and align health issues as part of your risk management strategy;
- Evaluate the impact of your health programmes and the overall wellness strategy.

Management teams should prioritise integrated wellness and health programmes as part of their top priorities. Perhaps the extensive national coronavirus programme and funding mechanisms will provide the impetus to prioritise health as an important area to be addressed. Too many South Africans have died of cancer, and other illnesses, hence the need for more proactive and preventative approaches to health. We should also have more open discussions about any health risks such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes and mental health. Additionally, the HR or Wellness Manager has a key role to play in supporting employees with health issues, as well as their family members.

The whole world is in lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, health is the most important issue in the world today. Current approaches and responses to health matters are too reactive and invariably put us on the back foot until we manage to effectively control it. But it appears as if we jump from one health crisis to the next. Remember the listeriosis outbreak a few years ago, all the emphasis then was on food safety. These ad hoc reactive approaches were necessary at the

time, but clearly we need in-depth research on health issues and how it affects work, the workplace and society at large.

It is time to create a caring and healthy society, one in which health is seen as a key aspect of humanity and good health and life is promoted, nurtured and celebrated. The more we focus on health as a lifestyle and a workplace imperative, the better we will be equipped in driving employee health at a national and global level. We have spread viruses all over the world, now we must start to spread good health all over the world and the workplace is an ideal place to start this process. If our commitment to health has become the major reason for the lockdown, then surely proactive health programmes should be one of our top priorities in the post lockdown period.

We all get colds or flu, some of us will get HIV/AIDS and some of us will be infected by the coronavirus. Perhaps the Covid-19 crisis will provide the impetus we need to put health at the top of our agenda, not only in broader society, but also in the workplace.

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