

#DAY43LOCKDOWNSA

## A tribute to Cancer Activist Addi Lang: A call for action



by

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Yesterday, cancer activist Addi Lang passed on. It was a very sad day for me having worked closely with Addi in supporting her national and global cancer campaign. We mourn her passing, but we celebrate her life and legacy.

Says Paulinah Somo, radio and television host yesterday on Instagram: "I woke up to the sad news of the passing of my dear friend and sister Addi Lang. Her breast cancer journey has tough, but she was determined to help others through the Forever Changed Awareness Campaign which I was blessed to be part of. I learned so much from walking this journey with you. As you always say at the end of each conversation ... Butterfly Blessings."

Addi was diagnosed with cancer in 2014 and underwent surgery and chemotherapy. In the same year she was appointed celebrity brand ambassador to begin the growth of the Forever Changed Global Cancer Awareness Campaign. Addi was the Executive Producer of the Forever Changed documentary launched in the USA in 2015. She was further involved with the launch of the campaign theme song "Forever Changed" by Aly Cook which was promoted throughout Australia and New Zealand. Addi was actively involved in fundraising for other cancer survivors and educating the public and corporate sector on cancer. In 2016 Addi developed the "Live Life Deliberately" programme accredited by the HR professional body of South Africa, the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP) to bring about awareness of cancer in the workplace.

In 2017 Addi organised a press conference which was held with Members of Parliament in attendance, who spoke about the campaign and the need for a cancer policy in the workplace at the National Assembly. In 2018, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced during the State of the Nation Address that

South Africa will embark on a National Cancer Programme. While there is no visible and public evidence of this programme, it was Addi's vision that this national programme should become a reality.

Since 2017, SABPP management and staff have interacted with Addi Lang and David Saloman from the Forever Changed Campaign. We immediately connected and started to plan collaboration in addressing the issue of cancer in the workplace and society at large. Hence, SABPP supported the Forever Changed Campaign in raising awareness and educating people about the imperative of dealing with cancer in a more holistic and integrated manner. Addi was a firm believer that people have options, and they need to be informed of all the options available to them. In fact, this issue of cancer is so important, it is a matter of life and death. Yet, Addi refused to accept that "cancer is a death sentence" as she continued to mobilise people, organisations and resources to create more awareness and support for cancer patients. Her main contribution was to position cancer as a workplace issue.

One of the National HR Standards developed by SABPP is on employee wellness and we believe that it is essential for companies to include cancer as an important employee wellness priority. The reality is that at least 10% of your employees will get cancer, and the other 90% will have family members, colleagues or friends with cancer. According to the Cancer Association of South Africa, one in four South Africans will be affected directly by cancer of either family, friends, colleagues or self. Furthermore, ANCON Medical states that there are about 115 000 new annual cancer cases in South Africa, and about 60 000 deaths per year. IOL News says that cancer is the biggest killer in South Africa.

Addi Lang was one of the greatest supporters of the National Standard on Employee Wellness. But let me remind you of what the National HR Standard on Employee Wellness is all about. SABPP defines employee wellness as "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." Clearly, cancer and Covid-19 fall within the scope of this definition of employee wellness.

A key focus of the campaign addressing cancer at work and society is about being more proactive and where possible, preventative in our behaviour and actions. It is also a call for creating a more caring workplace for accommodating and supporting our employees who have been diagnosed with cancer. I want to suggest that the acronym CANCER guides our thinking and actions going forward:

C = Care – We have to care for our employees and their family members affected by cancer;

A = Awareness – We have to raise awareness about cancer in society, including prevention;

N = Nutrition – We need to focus on the right diet in dealing with cancer;

C = Choices – We need to ensure that people are informed about all the choices they have;

E = Education – A massive education campaign is needed to build and share knowledge;

R = Responsibility – We need to take responsibility for our own lives and for ensuring that we are effective in this important campaign going forward. HR Managers must ensure that cancer programmes are integrated into employee wellness strategies.

Let us continue as managers, practitioners, employees and students to prioritise wellness and cancer programmes as two of our top priorities. It is our hope that while all the short-term attention is on Covid-19, that sooner rather than later the national cancer programme will provide the impetus to

prioritise cancer as an important area to be addressed. Too many South Africans have died of cancer, hence the need for more proactive, preventative and caring approaches to cancer. Also, managers in business have a key role to play in supporting employees with cancer, as well as their family members. The sad thing about annual “Wellness Week” campaigns is that some of the people joining us for these wellness activities may not be around next year at the same time. It is time to create a caring society, one in which humanity and life is celebrated. The more we focus on wellness as a lifestyle and a workplace issue, the better we will be equipped in driving employee wellness at a national level.

Addi’s life and legacy provides us with some key lessons, not only regarding approaches to cancer, but also in responding to the coronavirus pandemic:

- There is nothing more important than your health;
- Look after your health, hygiene, diet, nutrition and wellness;
- We need a positive and preventative attitude towards Covid-19;
- There are days when you will feel hopeless, frustrated and experience anxiety;
- Learn as much as you can about the disease – awareness and knowledge is key;
- You have choices, make sure that you fully understand your options before deciding how you will respond;
- Don’t think of yourself only, think about others and their health;
- We need to create a more caring society;
- It is fine to express your feelings, emotions, pain and fears;
- No topic is taboo, we need to talk and communicate about the virus;
- While cancer can spread throughout the body, Covid-19 spreads from person to person;
- Over and above physical pain, the greatest pain is stigmatisation, an uncaring attitude and discrimination;
- Unlike cancer, there is a very high recovery rate from Covid-19, and a very low death rate;
- We need extensive employee wellness and health policies and programmes in the workplace;
- We need citizen activists to champion the Covid-19 cause from a community perspective;
- In addition to the physical threat of being infected by the virus, mental health is important for all of us;
- We must work together in fighting the spread of the virus.
- We should put people and their health first in the workplace and society at large.

Given the coronavirus crisis, we are at the early stage of a global pandemic affecting the health and lives of millions of people. All of us are directly affected by the Covid-19 virus. We have changed our habits and behaviour, especially after being forced into lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. Ultimately, all health issues ranging from cancer, to HIV/AIDS, to hypertension, to mental health, to diabetes and to Covid-19 need a more integrated and holistic approach as part of corporate and national employee wellness strategies.

Addi Lang was one of those people who made a permanent impression on me. That is what makes activists like Addi such special people. Activists are people who campaign for social change. They are focused and relentless in their cause. Eventually they become the conscience of society. They force government, business, the media and the general public to listen and to act. And they practise continuously what they preach. Addi would never have traditional catering at her events. You would only find healthy food preventing and responding to cancer at her sessions. Major health campaigns need citizen activists to champion the cause as ordinary people committing to dealing with the crisis at a leadership and social level. Without these activists the world is a poorer place. Zackie Achmat from the Treatment Action Campaign fulfilled this role on behalf of people living with HIV/AIDS. Addi Lang put up her hand to lead the cancer campaign. We need a successor for Addi to keep her legacy alive. We also need a national Covid-19 activist.

Despite mobilising and supporting thousands of people, Addi was a lonely voice. And yesterday her voice was silenced. Let us continue with her legacy by prioritising cancer as a health and life issue in the workplace and society at large. Read about Addi's legacy on [www.foreverchanged.co.za](http://www.foreverchanged.co.za)

On the 42<sup>nd</sup> day of lockdown, we have lost a cancer "warrior" as Addi liked to be called. While we pay tribute to her on the 43<sup>rd</sup> day of the coronavirus lockdown in South Africa, we honour the life and legacy of a great South African. As a cancer and health activist, she taught us about cancer, but we can also draw lessons from her life to continue and intensify the cancer campaign, and to apply some of her life lessons to the Covid-19 endemic. We also need to remind one another that cancer is one of the underlying conditions contributing to Covid-19 deaths.

I am a better person because I have met and worked with Addi Lang. She educated me about cancer. I will miss her dearly. My condolences to the family and friends of Addi Lang, and in particular her life partner, David Saloman. Rest in Peace, Addi Lang. Long live her legacy. Butterfly Blessings.

*Marius Meyer Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP) and lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University. For more information about the coronavirus and Covid-19 visit [www.sacoronavirus.co.za](http://www.sacoronavirus.co.za)*