

**#DAY47LOCKDOWNSA**

## **Nurses need nurturing:**

**#InternationalNursesDay**

by

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The 12<sup>th</sup> of May is International Nurses Day, a special day for us to put the spotlight on the importance of nurses, and in particular to celebrate healthcare workers throughout the world. Over the past three months with the rapid spread of the coronavirus globally, and specifically in the countries in which the numbers of infections and deaths increased at a rapid rate, such as China, Italy, Spain, France, USA and UK, it became clear that nurses are at the centre of the coronavirus pandemic.

However, over the past month, it has become evident that South African nurses are concerned about their safety, especially when their colleagues are infected with the virus. At Tygerberg Hospital nurses protested on International Nurses Day over working conditions after two of their staff passed away of Covid-19. Similar protests occurred in other provinces, and again the collective voice of nurses is a cry for help that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in South Africa, the Department of Health has expressed its concern that the health system will not be able to cope with the crisis. The Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize has been visible on a daily basis and continued to thank nurses for the key role they are playing in treating patients. He also recognises nurses and other healthcare workers every day when he formally announces the updated Covid-19 numbers.

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 also a duty on hospitals as 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. Nurses as frontline healthcare workers 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. Therefore, any excuses pertaining to the lack of availability of protective equipment is unacceptable and indefensible. The same principle applies to other safety measures. If hospitals are unable to protect their own staff and the public, they should be closed down.

If we don't protect our nurses 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. We need to realise that our own future as healthy citizens is threatened if we don't protect and care for our nurses. Our own survival is dependent on the survival of nurses. We should also not forget that nurses have human and labour rights, and there is a duty and responsibility on employers to protect their employees. The death of a nurse from Covid-19 due to a lack of protective equipment is inexcusable.

Although nurses 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 risk exposure, workload and stress. With more than 11 000 Covid-19 cases reported, if the number of patients keep on increasing at such a rapid rate, nurses and hospitals will soon be totally overwhelmed, notwithstanding the additional facilities arranged by government.

While celebrating nurses on International Nurses Day, we are again reminded of the important role of nurses in the health system. 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. As individuals we are all responsible for either preventing the spread of the virus, or for spreading the virus. People who violated the lockdown regulations have contributed to the spread of 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.

In summary, there are key actions we need to prioritise in nurturing nurses in the workplace and society at large:

- We need to ensure that we have effective employee wellness strategies and plans for nurses;
- Management, doctors and patients should treat nurses with respect and dignity;
- All nurses need training on the coronavirus;
- A special safety and hygiene programme is needed for nurses;
- We need to ensure that nurses have all the necessary personal protective equipment;
- Nurses should not only be screened, but also tested for Covid-19;
- We need to ensure that all surfaces in hospitals are properly cleaned;
- We need to ensure that sufficient sanitisers are available at all hospitals and clinics;
- The mental health of nurses must be prioritised during this difficult time;
- The concerns and grievances of nurses should be addressed as a matter of urgency;
- We need more formal platforms for nurses to address the public directly, including social media, newspapers, television and other channels so that they can communicate directly to broader society.

The safety and wellness of nurses is critical to public health, now more than ever. Nurses not only care for the patients, but also the loved ones of the patients. Thus, we need to ensure that we provide all the nurturing and support they need to fulfil their duties effectively. It is time to show that we really care for nurses 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, emotional, spiritual and mental health is the key for the effective treatment of patients. It does not help us in any way if we classify nurses as essential workers and then we don't treat them as if they are essential. Nurses are the backbone and frontline of the health system, wherever they are. If we don't look after them, there will be no nurses to look after us. Let us nurture and support them in creating a more caring and healthy health system to the benefit of all of us. Now is the time to put nurses first. It is International Nurses Day every day.

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