

COVID-19: An update since our last note

Living in and adapting to a fluid environment seems to be the new normal. This week's focus is on President Ramaphosa's latest address.

This may be a disease that is caused by a virus, but it is spread by human conduct and behaviour.

- President Ramaphosa, 12 July 2020

THE STATE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA

The spread of the virus is increasing exponentially in South Africa. As at Sunday 12 July, we were experiencing 500 new infections every hour. The deaths from the disease have also steadily increased and now stand at 4 079 (as at 12 July 2020). The greatest concern is that 25% of new deaths were recorded in the past week. The biggest problem is that many South Africans have been acting carelessly and recklessly and thereby placed themselves and those around them at risk. Many South Africans have refused to wear cloth face masks in public, have organised parties and drinking sprees. The President also provided an example of a funeral that was attended by more than a thousand people.

Over the weekend, South Africa surpassed Italy and is currently the country with the tenth highest number of infections in the world. At the current rate of infection, we will be surpassing the UK, Mexico, Spain, Chile and Peru in this week to be in fifth place, only behind the USA, Brazil, India and Russia.

We still have a serious shortage of more than 12,000 health workers, mostly nurses, doctors and physiotherapists

- President Ramaphosa, 12 July 2020

The biggest surges are currently in Gauteng which is fast approaching 100 000 recorded cases, and the Eastern Cape which has passed 50 000 infections. While the rate of transmission has slowed in the Western Cape, they are approaching 80 000 cases. We are however nowhere close to the peak yet. Even though the different provinces will peak at different times, projections for the peak of the infections in the different provinces is only between the end of July and late September. The current models project between 40 000 and 50 000 total deaths by the end of the year. It has already happened that certain hospitals had been turning infected people away due to a lack of beds or supplies.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. While infections rise exponentially, it is important to note that our case fatality rate of 1.5% is among the lowest in the world. Our number of deaths places us in 23rd place in the world. The global average case fatality rate is 4.4%. One of the possible reasons for this low fatality rate is that South Africa has learnt from the experience of other countries and only uses ventilators as a last resort. South African patients are rather provided with high-flow nasal oxygen which seems to be more successful. President Ramaphosa noted that we have also been developing ventilators locally and 12 000 are expected towards the end of July. The President has, however, reiterated that we are not helpless in the face of this storm. We can change the course of this pandemic through our own actions.

Changes to regulation

The National Coronavirus Command Council considered returning the country to a stricter level of lockdown. However, they decided against this due to the limited impact it would have on the spread of the virus and the massive economic impact it would certainly have.

The wearing of a cloth face mask, homemade item or another appropriate item, that covers the nose and mouth, is now mandatory for every person when in a public place, using public transport or in a business. Masks will, however, not be required when doing vigorous exercise, provided a distance of three metres is maintained from any other person. An employer, a manager or an owner of a building that allows people to enter without a face mask may be subject to six months' imprisonment or a fine. The regulations were also changed to make it clear that overnight stays for leisure purposes are prohibited. The President again reiterated the need for proper ventilation in businesses with the aim to prevent the recirculation of air, and to increase natural ventilation. Operational Health and Safety Regulations on ventilation were

published on 5 June. While the President mentioned that local taxis will be able to carry a 100% load provided all windows are open, the window requirement does not appear in the regulations. Long-distance taxis are still limited to 70% capacity.

Due to the misuse of alcohol and the accompanying strain it places on medical services, the sale, dispensing and distribution of alcohol was suspended with immediate effect. Nevertheless, transport of alcohol for export is still permitted, as with cigarettes. The ban on tobacco products remains in place. As most trauma injuries occur at night, a curfew has been reintroduced from 21h00 to 04h00. There will also be a renewed focus on gender-based violence prevention programmes at district levels.

Some measures were relaxed. All auctions are allowed and parks can open for exercise but not any other form of gathering. Some activities still present too much of a risk to permit at this stage. For this reason, family visits and other social activities will unfortunately not be allowed for now.

Sources

Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on progress in the national effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic (12 July 2020).

<https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2020/07/12/statement-by-president-cyril-ramaphosa-on-progress-in-the-national-effort-to-contain-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Reported Cases and Deaths by Country, Territory or Conveyance

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

Summary by Ronald King. Head of Public Policy and Regulatory Affairs.