

**SPEAKING NOTES BY THE MINISTER OF HEALTH DR JOE PHAAHLA
DURING THE COVID-19 VACCINATION UPDATE MEDIA BRIEFING –
FRIDAY, 04 MARCH 2022**

Good morning to our facilitator Mr Foster Mohale

Morning Deputy Minister Dr Dhlomo,

DG Dr Sandile Buthelezi

DDG Dr Nicholas Crisp and other Department of Health Managers,

Drs Waasila Jassat and Michelle Groome from the NICD

Members of the media

Viewers and listeners at home

It is exactly a month since we gave our last update on our efforts to manage the COVID-19 pandemic especially progress with the main weapon in our hands, vaccination, the last such being on 4 February 2022. After that there was State of the Nation Address and as they say the rest is history.

However, we have been in touch with the public through various other platforms of communication making announcements including on changes with the vaccination program which we will speak to this morning. All is being done to make the vaccination accessible to protect lives and open economic and social life.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the world and our own country. Over the last seven days the WHO reported that there were more than 10 million new cases in the world with 60 000 deaths in a week. The Omicron variant remained dominant with 99,5% of the tested sequenced specimen .

In South Africa in the last week there has been a 20% reduction in new cases from 16 000/ week to 12800/ week. Gauteng province is still leading at 38,4% of new cases followed by Western Cape at 20% and KwaZulu-Natal at 15,5%.

In the past week all provinces reported a decline in weekly incidence risk except for KwaZulu-Natal which showed no change.

The percentage testing positive in the last week was highest in Mpumalanga at 14% followed by Western Cape at 12,6% , North West at 10,5% while all other provinces had a below 10% positivity rate. The percentage positive was higher in the 10-14 years of age at 21%.

The dominant variant in Republic of South Africa remains Omicron although with a subvariant called BA.2 accounting for 78% of the infections in January and February.

Currently there are 25 758 active cases which is an increase of 1,3% over the last 24hrs. In terms of districts increase has been recorded in Overberg, City of Cape Town, Frances Baard and West Coast. 12 out of 52 districts recorded increases compared to 14 days earlier

Admissions in hospitals as of yesterday stood at 2 602 which is an 8% decline over 24hrs. Over the last seven days there has been an 11% decline in hospitalisation, and 72% of admissions are unvaccinated, while 83% of the admissions are in general wards, 7.4% in high care and 9,6% in ICU. Deaths in hospital have reduced by 28% in the last seven days. Total fatalities now stand at just under 99 500 with recovery rate of 96,6%.

The major disappointment is that the rate of infections have not declined steadily as we had anticipated as we can see the recurring spikes in several districts leading to a plateau of the curve instead of flattening similar to what we reported a month ago.

As a result the positivity has lingered between 7-10% over the last four weeks with 7% yesterday. We hope to say more sustained decline which will result in less than 5% positivity which will qualify to say the pandemic is under control.

Vaccination continues to move steadily still not at the desired pace. After remaining at between 60-70 000 doses per day on week days over most of January and February there has been a pick over the last seven days to over 100 000 doses over the last two days after a steady rise.

As of yesterday evening **31 879 000** doses of vaccines had been administered to 19,08 million adult individuals constituting 47,95% coverage of adults with at least one jab , 56,5% coverage for women and 43,5% coverage for men. Individual adults fully vaccinated are 17m at 43% coverage.

We should be able to pass the 48% coverage over the next few days which is still a far cry from the 70% coverage required for population immunity. The 60+ cohort remain our best performers at 68% , while 50-59 age stand at 64% with over 50s at overall 60% full vaccination.

The Free State province is still the leading province at 57,2% coverage. In terms of absolute numbers Gauteng is leading by far with 8,9m doses administered to just over 5m people but coverage is at 45% due to big population.

Our biggest drawback is the 18-34 years age cohort with 34% coverage and 29,3% full vaccination, we need at least another 5m of this cohort to get to 60% coverage. We hope that the initiative by young people to drive the vaccination campaign of their peers which was launched two weeks ago will bear fruit. Total doses administered to the 12-17 cohort stands just over 1,65 million.

As you will have heard by now the time frames for second doses of Pfizer and boosters of both Pfizer and J&J have been brought closer due to available capacity and the need to protect those who want to be protected, DR Crisp will say more.

As I mentioned earlier two weeks ago we were happy to support young people who decided to take the vaccination campaign as their own under the theme

KeReady, I am ready. The campaign is led by young health professionals and ours is simply to support and encourage, they are in charge of the campaign.

The issue of vaccination mandates remains a difficult topic in our midst. A team of senior government officials have been leading consultations with various stakeholders including at NEDLAC and they should be ready to report at the next NCCC with recommendations. While there are different views on the matter, the undisputed fact is that the more people are vaccinated the more we can open many economic and social activities safely.

During his SONA speech President Ramaphosa stated that government has the intention to do away with the state of disaster as a tool to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. The department of health and other departments were given the task to come with other instruments which could be used to provide whatever safety measures are still required to limit the spread and impact of the pandemic. The NDOH has been hard at work revising its regulations to control notifiable infectious diseases and is ready to present at the next NCCC meeting.

As the WHO has stated at various forums two of which I attended this week including yesterday, COVID-19 is not over as can be seen from the global numbers and we must avoid reversing the hard earned gains we have made as we strive to end the pandemic.

We hope the reviewed health regulations and others from other departments will assist in a guided reopening of various economic and social activities especially in the leisure and tourism areas with less risk of super spreaders. The proposals will include amendments to travel requirements which could make it easier and cheaper to travel safely. Details will only be available after discussion at NCCC.

We want to make a clarion call again to all South Africans that COVID-19 can be defeated if we all work together to protect ourselves and those around us with vaccination.

One always feels very envious when participating in various international meetings and you hear fellow health ministers reporting vaccination coverages of between 70-90% and unlike in the past you cannot blame vaccines apartheid because you are sitting with sufficient stock including donations which are not being taken up.

The future of this country is in our hands, vaccines have proven to be safe and effective in preventing severe illness and death. We have a few weeks and months to claim our place amongst nations of the world.

Beyond this year it will be very difficult to interact with other nations without vaccination, let's make sure that we are not left behind, Ke nako, it's time to be ready like our young leaders who have taken it upon themselves to lead the vaccination campaign.

I thank you