

**SPEAKING NOTES BY HEALTH MINISTER, DR MJ PHAAHLA
DURING VIRTUAL BRIEFING ON COVID-19 AND VACCINATION
ROLLOUT PROGRAMME – FRIDAY, 29 APRIL 2022**

Thank you, Programme Director,

Greetings to my colleague and Deputy Minister Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo

Dr Waasila Jassat, from NICD

Dr Richard Lessells, from Genomic Sequence Network

Deputy Vice-Chancellor from the UKZN, Prof Mosa Moshabela

Director General, Dr Sandile Buthelezi and Departmental officials

Members of the Media

Viewers and Listeners at home

Good morning

It has been some time since we shared with South Africans how the Covid-19 pandemic is progress in our country and its impact on our society. A major focus over the almost two months has been on the exit from the State of Disaster as a tool for managing the pandemic du. Over this period there has been a sense of stability characterised by low infection rates. At the same time we have been witnessing very low uptake of vaccination.

During this time where the regulatory regime around containment of the Covid-19 dominated the public discourse, we continued to warn that this was not the time to lower our guards as we have been noticing serious spikes of infections in other parts of the world with dire consequences. Over the last 2 weeks we started to notice a continuous rise in daily infections led in the main by Gauteng, Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal.

The rise in daily infections took a sharper upstick as we got to the end of on the week ending Saturday, 23rd April, and has been sustained during the week starting on Monday 25th April reaching up to over 6000 on Wednesday 27th April, which are tests done on Tuesday 26th April. We witnessed a slight decline to just above 4000 on Thursday 28th April, but these are tests done on a public holiday, 27th April. But positivity rate remains high at 17% with Gauteng and KzN above 20%.

We decided to wait a bit long to observe for more than seven days to see if the upward trend is sustained and the answer is yes. Nationally, as of 25th April, there has been a 137% increase in new cases compared to 7 days earlier, which on the curve shows a steep rise. The new steep rise driven mainly by higher rates of infection in Gauteng, KzN and Western Cape – the three account for 85% of the cases in the last 7 days.

Yesterday and last 7 days the average breakdown is Gauteng 53%, KzN 23% and Western Cape 11% of all the cases. The rate at yesterday were Gauteng 23%, KzN 23%, Western Cape 16% and Northern Cape 18%. Active cases have risen from lows of 15 000 few weeks ago to 39 000 yesterday. The R – number = 1.56 on 21/4/2022, the highest incidence per 100 000 population is:

Gauteng = 76

KZn = 47.6

WC = 46.5

So in terms of rapid rise of rates of infections there is no doubt. What remains stable even though with some change in hospital admissions including into ICU.

28/4 = 2027 total admission of 192 in ICU.

In absolute numbers – this was admissions in week 18 – 24 April from 346 admissions previous week to 108 – but this far from threatening capacity. There was a rise in deaths but from a low base = from 51 previous 7 days to 150 in week 18 – 24 April. The question which is now top of our minds is whether we have entered the 5th Wave earlier than was expected. Prof Abdul Karim, in his weekly analysis published every Tuesday argues that from a technical definition of 75 cases/100 000 population daily – we have entered the 5th in most provinces. From another definition it is proposed that if we reach > 6 237 cases per day on 7 days average = 5th Wave. Either way, we went to 6372 cases on Wednesday, which means its possible that the 5th Wave will qualify in next four days.

What is still uncertain is that our scientists also tell us that a new wave will come through a new variant nicknamed Pi, which will need to be more transmissible and escape immunity. But at this stage what is confirmed to be dominant are sub-variants of Omicron called B.4 and B.5, which have changes to the original B.1 but not enough to be new variants of concern.

Whilst these are the scientific analysis which the NICD and Krisp colleagues, will say more about, what is clear is that we are still at great risk of Covid-19 – especially as we go into a long winter than normal where we spend more time indoors including in gatherings. Because of the lack of a clear driver of the spiking infections, there is also an analysis that because of the Easter weekend, which also coincided with Ramadan for Muslims and Passover for Jewish faith, the related gatherings may be the tricker.

The next 7 days until 6th May will give a clearer picture as to where we are going i.e. whether the 5th Wave started earlier without distinct new variant

but driven by sub-variants or its just an early spike driven by Easter weekend. Our message again is that Covid-19 remains a threat and we cannot afford to drop all prevention measures. We do not believe that it is a correct public health approach to say because there is lot of immunity driven by high levels of previous infections and vaccination we should drop all prevention measures.

We again urge all those who are still not vaccinated to come forward and take the jab. We are still under 50% of adults with at least one jab and that's not good. We urge young adults especially to come forward. Natural immunity wanes after time and unlike vaccination it cannot be booked. We urge all those who qualify for boosters to all take the opportunity before deep winter.

In terms of the Regulations, we thank all South Africans who responded. We are processing the more than 300 000 comments received and will conclude before 5th May when the Disaster Recovery Regulations expire.

Thank you