



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Date:	13 May 2022		
To:	Dr MJ Phaahla, MP Honourable Minister of Health	From:	Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19

AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT UPSURGE IN COVID-19 CASES

Problem Statement and Task to Committee

1. The national state of disaster in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic was lifted on 5 April 2022. Thereafter, a series of regulations were issued by the Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs for the immediate 30-day period after the state of disaster. Those regulations have now lapsed.
2. On 4 May 2022, the Minister of Health issued a limited set of regulations in terms of the National Health Act, 2003, dealing with:
 - a. wearing of face masks;
 - b. gatherings; and
 - c. persons entering the country.
3. The scientific underpinning of these regulations has been questioned. In particular, the regulations are impugned as being based on an outdated “control” paradigm.
4. South Africa is currently experiencing an upsurge in the number of COVID-19 cases, which is being portrayed as a “5th wave”.
5. The MAC on COVID-19 has been asked to provide comment on the appropriateness of the current response to the upsurge, including the regulations issued by the Minister of Health.
6. This advisory is focused on the issue of mask-wearing and the restrictions on gatherings, but does not cover the regulations on persons entering the country.

Background/Current Information

1. An increase in the number of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases is being reported in all provinces of South Africa, with marked increases in the proportion of tests reported as positive. As previously defined, this meets the criterion for a “wave”, and would thus constitute a 5th such wave in South Africa since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020.
2. However, as was noted in the 4th wave, associated with the same variant of concern (Omicron), few patients with COVID-19 are presenting with severe disease, and to date, the impact on hospital capacity is lower than seen in previous waves (notably, that associated with the Delta variant).
3. Likewise, the impact on both COVID-related and excess deaths is, at present, minimal.
4. This increase in incident cases is occurring against the backdrop of high seroprevalence, indicative of previous exposure to SARS-CoV-2. Seroprevalence is estimated as high as 90% in urban areas, but is possibly lower in rural areas.
5. In addition, almost 50% of the South African adult population have been vaccinated against COVID-19.
6. A considerable proportion of the South African population can therefore be considered to benefit from hybrid immunity, conferred by both immunisation and natural infection.
7. There are three possible scenarios for how the COVID-19 pandemic may unfold in future. Firstly, a future SARS-CoV-2 variant may be less severe. Secondly, the SARS-CoV-2 virus may continue to evolve towards endemicity, leading to periodic spikes in incidence which may

be seasonal in nature. Thirdly, a more virulent and more transmissible virus may emerge. An effective national strategy must therefore consider both the current scenario, in which the Omicron variant dominates, but must continue to prepare for the worst-case scenario.

8. The MAC on COVID-19 has previously provided advisories on the following topics of relevance to the question at hand:
 - a. Strategies to address COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and promote acceptance in South Africa (1 December 2021, as an inter-MAC advisory);
 - b. Mitigating COVID-19 in South Africa: going forward (8 February 2022);
 - c. Revised COVID-19 screening requirements at borders and ports of entry (15 February 2022);
 - d. Restrictions on gatherings (16 February 2022); and
 - e. Monitoring COVID-19 between acute outbreaks and deciding on appropriate and timely responses (25 April 2022).
9. In addition, the MAC on COVID-19 Vaccines has provided an advisory entitled “COVID-19 Vaccine Prioritisation for South Africa” (9 May 2022).

Evidence review and recommendations

1. The current “wave” definitions are based on the number of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases, expressed as incident cases per 100 000 population.¹ However, the World Health Organization has established no standardised criteria to define a “wave”. Since the relationship between incident cases and significant morbidity and mortality is less direct than before, the meaning of a “wave” has changed. Despite this, the “wave” concept still has high visibility with the general public and is widely used in the media, both in South Africa and abroad. A clear terminology needs to be agreed by public health authorities in South Africa, and used consistently. The 25 April 2022 MAC advisory used the term “an acute outbreak of COVID-19 that is of national importance”. The advisory recommended relying on a combination of measures, and not only incident cases. Measures such as as COVID-19 related hospitalisations, total hospitalisations, oxygen utilisation trends and deaths can be used to trigger a series of actions designed to respond to an acute outbreak of national importance. A “wave” of cases is no longer a sufficient indicator of the need for the imposition of regulatory restrictions, but can inform individual actions aimed at limiting personal risk.

2. The limited restrictions imposed by the regulations published by the Minister of Health in terms of the National Health Act are consistent with the advice provided by the MAC on COVID-19 in relation to the wearing of face masks indoors. In addition, the MAC on COVID-19 recommended the importance of ensuring the capacity of the health system to respond to any increased demands for hospital services, and paying greater attention to encouraging COVID-19 vaccination including the provision of booster doses to those at increased risk. Furthermore, the MAC on COVID-19 previously recommended limiting both indoor and outdoor gatherings. Given the lower virulence but increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, and the very low risk of aerosol spread in outdoor settings, a more nuanced approach to the regulation of outdoor gatherings is now appropriate.

3. It is therefore recommended that the 50% capacity limit for outdoor gatherings be lifted, but that those at high risk of severe disease from COVID-19 should consider wearing face masks in such settings.

4. The MAC on COVID-19 Vaccines has emphasised that the priority should remain maximising the uptake of the primary vaccination series and booster doses for groups at highest risk of developing severe disease (adults ≥ 50 years) and groups at risk of suboptimal response to vaccination (immunocompromised individuals).

5. The 8 February 2022 MAC advisory argued for a change in strategy from containment of the pandemic to mitigation, as COVID-19 moves towards endemicity.

¹ <https://www.nicd.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Proposed-definition-of-COVID-19-wave-in-South-Africa.pdf>

6. Accordingly, it is recommended that the following statement be communicated to the public:

An appropriate approach to mitigating the impact of COVID-19

South Africa is currently experiencing an upsurge in the number of COVID-19 cases. At present, the number of COVID-19 patients requiring hospitalisation is not increasing to the same extent. Although there is not a marked increase in the number of lives lost to COVID-19, some patients are seriously ill. The pandemic is by no means over.

Almost all governments are looking for appropriate ways to mitigate the severity of COVID-19, rather than to attempt to contain the virus. To “mitigate” means to reduce the severity of the impact, on the health system and on people. Informed by the scientific evidence presented by the Ministerial Advisory Committees, the Minister of Health has retained limited restrictions to mitigate the severity of COVID-19. Encouraging mask-wearing indoors, and more generally for anyone with respiratory symptoms or at high risk of severe illness, focusing on improved ventilation, and promoting vaccination against COVID-19 are all reasonable and appropriate responses at this time. Intensive surveillance is also needed to detect any new variants that may emerge.

At present, the upsurge in COVID-19 cases is associated with the spread of particular sub-lineages of the Omicron variant, not the emergence of a new variant. However, the coronavirus continues to mutate, and new variants may emerge that are more easily spread or cause more severe disease. We can all do our bit to help to limit the amount of virus that is circulating in our country, and thus reduce the risk of new mutations developing. Allowing unrestricted spread of the virus is irresponsible and will place more people at risk.

Vaccination is an important science-based mitigation strategy. Together, we can make a difference, for ourselves, our families and our communities.

Rationale for recommendations

- Urgent attention needs to be paid to an alternative to the “wave” terminology, which focuses not only on case numbers but on health and health system impact. The present acute outbreak cannot be described as being of national importance at this time. However, it does provide an opportunity to emphasise personal responsibility for common-sense and justified public health and social measures. Encouraging the wearing of masks indoors and taking reasonable precautions in gatherings and crowded areas can limit the spread of the virus, even if these measures are not aimed at containment. Such measures are appropriate and responsible elements of a mitigation response.
- The promotion of COVID-19 vaccination remains key to the pandemic response. Every possible means to encourage uptake, to address barriers to vaccination and all identified reasons for vaccine hesitancy, must be deployed with appropriate urgency and the requisite resources.

Thank you for consideration of this advisory.

Kind regards



PROF KOLEKA MLISANA



PROF MARIAN JACOBS

CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

DATE: 13 May 2022

CC:

- » **Dr SSS Buthelezi (Director-General: Health)**
- » **Dr N Crisp (Deputy Director-General: National Health Insurance)**

Disclaimer: As stipulated in its Terms of Reference, the MAC on COVID-19 is an advisory Committee to the Minister of Health and does not have any delegated powers to act on behalf of, or to commit, the Minister or Government to any actions. Recommendations offered by the MAC on COVID-19 constitute evidence-informed advice only and do not represent final decisions of the Minister of Health or government.