

**Opening Remarks for the Minister of Health**  
**Scientific Webinar: Update on COVID-19 and the 501.V2 Variant**

18 January 2021

- **Deputy Minister of Health Hon. Dr Joe Phaahla**
- **Co-chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 Prof. Salim Abdool Karrim**
- **Director General of Health Dr Sandile Buthelezi**
- **The Scientific Team that will be presenting tonight (Prof Karrim will introduce shortly)**
- **Colleagues in Health Care**
- **Members of the Media**

It gives me great pleasure to open this webinar on advancements in COVID-19 research. We will particularly focus on the 501.V2 variant and the implications it has on the epidemiology of the South African pandemic.

Previously we postulated that this variant may be driving the increased transmission observed in the second wave. We also stated that more work needed to be done to ascertain its virulence and ability to evade our defense mechanisms, including therapeutics and vaccines. These theories have been scientifically tested and we therefore come together, with the scientific and research community, to gain some insight into this work and the current observations that have significant bearing on the way we need to respond to the variant and future mutations.

As a country that carries 85% of the SADC region burden, it is incumbent upon us to take leadership in strategies for COVID-19 combat. The work that has been done by the scientific community, especially in the field of genomic surveillance, has been exemplary and I wish to take this opportunity to thank

these colleagues for positioning the country as a world leader in genomic surveillance and emergency response.

It has been encouraging to know that, despite the mutations, we are still able to protect ourselves with the amour that we have established. This week has seen some promising signs of decline in transmission- yesterday we noted a 23% decrease in new cases nationally compared to 7-days prior. This could be attributable to many factors, including enhanced physical distancing facilitated by lockdown regulations. We must thank South Africans for adhering to the regulations, difficult and frustrating as it may be. Every sacrifice made has saved lives and we appreciate the patriotism South Africans are displaying to protect the sanctity of life.

Having said that, the health care system continues to experience significant strain with hospitalisations continuing to trend upwards, showing an 18,3% increase on 16 January compared to 7-days prior. As at 16 January, nearly 18 000 (17 878) patients were admitted, with 2472 in ICU, 1117 on ventilators and 5 850 requiring oxygen. This is a significant additional burden to the system and we must salute our health care workers for their stamina and courage as they continue to battle it out in the forefront. We understand the significant risks that you take every day, yet we have witnessed sheer commitment by the professions in health care and a willingness to engage in pursuit of excellence in health care delivery. We thank you and appreciate you during this extraordinary time.

This session is for you, the frontline worker who must individualise each patients care with the tools given to them. We hope that this session will allow us to bring the best solutions in case management to the fore, as well as elicit some public health considerations that can take us forward in the fight against COVID-19.

I want to assure you all, no matter what debates and speculation there may be out there in the environment, that this government will provide you with vaccines. The programme will prioritise you, as our front line workers, from this first quarter of the year. We will then continue to roll out inoculation to all parts of our country during the second quarter onwards. Today, I give you this undertaking- we will not renege on this commitment.

It finally remains for me to make a heartfelt appeal to the nation, on behalf of my colleagues who who stoically remain committed, despite being exhausted by the sheer burden of the COVID-19 pandemic: as we move back to our places of work, and even as we prepare for mass inoculation, we must continue to adhere to the regulations. This will be crucial to ensure we can maintain the decline we are observing, which will be threatened by increased movement of people across provinces and into places of congregation. Everyone must continue to play their part and protect one another.

Without much further ado I declare this webinar open and look forward to discussions that will ensue this evening

I thank You

ENDS

**Issued by the Ministry of Health**

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