

## **MINISTER OF HEALTH DR JOE PHAAHLA SPEAKING NOTES DURING COVID-19 MEDIA BRIFING- 04 FEBRYARY 2022**

Good morning facilitator, Mr Foster Mohale

Morning to Deputy Minister Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo,

DG Buthelezi and other managers, Dr Crisp,

Professor Jeremy Nel, a member of Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19

Drs Waasila Jassat and Michelle Groome, from NICD,

Members of the media

Viewers and listeners at home

Three weeks ago on the 14th January we gave an update on the progressive of the fourth wave driven by the Omicron variant. We indicated at that stage that that there was a steady decline in new infections but emphasised that the decline was at a pace anywhere close to the rapid rise when the fourth wave broke out in late November to December 2021.

The last 14 days including the last 7 days have given us a confusing picture. We have seen a less resilient decline in infections. The picture been that of a stalemate where there's no serious decline and yet no worrying rise in infections. Instead of the curve flattening it has taken the shape of a plateau.

Percentage of new cases over the last 7 days has decreased by only 0,3%. Three provinces viz Free State, Gauteng and Mpumalanga have actually shown increases compared to 7 days earlier with F State at 20%, Gauteng at 17% and Mpumalanga at 12 % increase. In terms of absolute

numbers Gauteng has been leading in proportion of the cases but stable at positivity rate between 9-11%. On the other hand Limpopo province continues to yield positivity rates higher than the national average of 9-12% with Limpopo at above 20% consistently, with 27% just yesterday. The number of active cases stood at 54 849 yesterday.

Our epidemiologists believe that the stagnation in the slowing down of new infections can be linked to the opening of schools. In support of this is also an observation that over the last 14 days we have witnessed more infections amongst the young people of below 20 years of age.

Some colleagues who are in Gauteng Province practice also report similar observation seeing more school going youth testing positive. It is possible that increased movement after holidays especially as schools open is also adding to this. We therefore have reason to be optimistic that as schools settle down and there's reduced movement of people there will be faster and sustained reduction of infections.

16 Districts in the country have shown increased rates of infections in the last 7 days. There have been reports of sub-variants of the Omicron variant but the NICD colleagues will say more but they don't seem to be a major factor.

Hospitalisation has remained stable with just over 5000 admissions as of yesterday, with over 85% in general wards with only 4.2% capacity utilised, 6,7% in high care and 8,4% in ICU utilising 7,5% of capacity. At this stage we can therefore restate that our health facilities are not under pressure from COVID-19.

On the vaccination side we crossed the 30 million doses administered on Wednesday night two days ago which took longer than we had wished for but nevertheless it's a significant milestone.

As of last night we were at 30 100 000 doses with 18 604 643 individuals with at least one jab = 46,7% adult coverage while 41,61% are fully vaccinated. For the 12-17 years old, 1 112 000 first doses and total with 2nd doses is 1 276 000 dose administered.

The over 60 years continue to lead the pack at 67, 25 coverage, 50+ at 63,15% , 35-49 years at 51% and lastly the most difficult to convince the 18-34 at 33%. The Free State province is still leading at 55,5%, Western Cape 54,5%, Limpopo 53,4% and Eastern Cape 51,2% while the remaining 5 provinces are at between 40 and 48% coverage. Gauteng leads with absolute numbers at just under 5 million individuals and 8,4 million doses. Total boosters administered is 646 466

The dashboard which we launched 3 weeks ago to show the difference in hospitalisation between vaccinated and unvaccinated continue to show that at least 2/3 of those who are admitted to hospital are not vaccinated. Yesterday we visited Ka-Maqxaki High School in Gqeberha while on a visit to monitor vaccination and other health services in the Eastern Cape Province.

It was very impressive to see a sizeable queue of learners waiting to be vaccinated and very upbeat about it. The school principal and his managers and staff worked with the district health officials to plan the pop up vaccination site with the cooperation of parents who provided signed consent forms.

Our vaccination sites remain open and ready to offer the services including mobile and pop up convenience to stakeholders.

We again appeal to all South Africans to seize the opportunity of protecting themselves and those around them now. While the fourth wave remains stable even though we are not completely out of it while the rate remains above 10%, we know that the virus is still very far from being eliminated. The only way to get closer to normality safely is if more of us vaccinate including taking boosters once we qualify.

It is expected that by the end of February we will reach our below 5% positivity which will signal stability but there is also expectation that that as we get closer to winter the 5th wave will break out or even earlier depending on variants of concern. Only high coverage vaccination will reduce the emergence of more variants.

A week ago cabinet announced changes to a number of practices used in the containment and prevention of COVID-19 pandemic. These changes had initially been announced through a circular issued by the Director General of Health Dr Sandile Buthelezi late in December 2021 but later withdrawn pending certain processes.

The consultations and alignment with previously gazetted regulations was finalised and we can now confirm as follows as advised by the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19:

a) That we will discontinue quarantining of contacts of COVID-19 cases.

b) No need for testing of contacts who are asymptomatic. Instead if you are a contact you should just take extra precautions in mingling closely with other people for 5-7 days while observing whether you will develop symptoms.

c) Contact tracing by health workers including community health workers should stop. In situations where there are cluster outbreaks in clearly identified congregate settings including work places a telephone based alert should be given to those who could be affected so that they can start the 5-7 days self-observation.

d) Those who test positive on routine testing such as for travel or meetings but are asymptomatic need not isolate but should observe the emergence of symptoms while taking precautions for 5-7 days.

E) For mild illness isolation is reduced from 10 to 7 days and not need to test again when symptoms are gone.

f) Moderate to severe cases will usually entail hospitalisation. After discharge they need further 7 days of home isolation and after that no need for testing. Going back to work for health workers must be with a N95 mask.

E) These rules apply to vaccinated and unvaccinated people.

I hope these gives clarity. We will finalise the directions in terms of the Disaster Management Act and publish the changes in the government gazette.

Thanks to our health workers on the frontline, let's support them by vaccinating.