health
Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Date:	15 October 2021		
To:	**Honourable Dr MJ Phaahla, MP** **Minister of Health**	From:	**Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19**

COVID-19 SCREENING REQUIREMENTS AT BORDERS AND PORTS OF ENTRY (LAND, SEA AND AIR)

Problem Statement and Task to Committee

The MAC on COVID-19 was requested to review the current COVID-19 screening requirements for land, air and sea ports of entry.

Background/Current Information

- COVID-19 incidence has declined in all nine provinces, and the third wave of the pandemic in South Africa has been declared over. Together with global reductions in case numbers, this suggests that a change in the current COVID-19 screening requirements at the borders is warranted.

- Current regulations gazetted on 15 December 2020[1] require that a person entering the Republic must:
  - Be subjected to screening on arrival at the point of entry and must present a completed traveller health questionnaire to a port health official; and
  - provide to the port health official a valid negative COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test result, performed not more than 72 hours before date of departure from the country of origin; or
  - if not in possession of a valid negative COVID-19 PCR test result, be subjected to antigen testing at the point of entry, and may be subjected to quarantine at an approved facility at his or her own cost.

- The MAC on COVID-19 advisory on *Screening Process for Land Border Crossings During the Festive Season* dated 30 December 2020, made the following recommendations, among others;
  - To discontinue COVID-19 testing requirements for land-border entry into South Africa.
  - To implement a "travel bubble" with selected neighbouring countries (Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe).

- The recommendations above were, however, contingent on certain criteria being met by the selected countries (e.g. local transmission remaining below a specified threshold). Travellers from any country that was not part of the proposed "travel bubble" would need to provide proof

1. DISASTER MANAGEMENT ACT, 2002: AMENDMENT OF REGULATIONS ISSUED IN TERMS OF SECTION 27(2). Gazette No 44004, 15 December 2020

of a negative PCR test or undergo antigen testing on arrival.

- The National Health Laboratory Service has raised concerns about capacity constraints and the cost implications of providing antigen testing at ports of entry. Currently over 200 tests are performed to find one positive result, representing a cost of R70,000 – R170,000 per positive test. The NHLS have recommended that testing at all borders cease.

- In addition, it has been pointed out that a PCR test is prohibitively expensive in some countries, making it unaffordable to many travellers.

- Vaccines still have limited availability in many land border neighbouring countries.

Evidence review

- With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries imposed travel restrictions and requirements as a way of excluding travellers that were infected with COVID-19. According to United Nations World Tourism Organisation, international tourist arrivals declined by about 1 billion or 74% between January and December 2020. In the first quarter of 2021, the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer points to a decline of 88%.[2]

- Despite these measures, transmission of COVID-19 variants has not been prevented, with global distribution of the Delta variant in particular demonstrated worldwide. Fourth waves have been recorded in France, the Middle East, and several African countries.[3]

- A recent meta analysis based on both modelling and observational studies[4] noted that "the certainty of the evidence for most travel-related control measures and outcomes is very low". Nonetheless, the authors concluded that, "Broadly, travel restrictions may limit the spread of disease across national borders. Symptom/exposure-based screening measures at borders on their own are likely not effective; PCR testing at borders as a screening measure likely detects more cases than symptom/exposure-based screening at borders, although if performed only upon arrival this will likely also miss a meaningful proportion of cases. Quarantine is likely to largely avoid further transmission from travellers. Combining quarantine with PCR testing at borders will likely improve effectiveness." In addition, the authors noted that any estimates of effectiveness would be dependent on a combination of factors such as the "levels of community transmission, travel volumes and duration, other public health measures in place, and the exact specification and timing of the measure".

- A personal communication report suggests that pre-travel testing performed in a South African private laboratory showed an overall PCR test positivity rate of 3.3% in the period October 2020-October 2021. Fluctuations in the PCR test positivity rate mimicked the waves of the pandemic, with a peak of 7.1% in January 2021 (second-wave) and 6.22% in July 2021 (third-wave). The most recent data demonstrate a positivity rate of 0.43% in the last month.[5]

[2] UNCTAD, 2021. *Global economy could lose over $4 trillion due to COVID-19 impact on tourism.* https://unctad.org/news/global-economy-could-lose-over-4-trillion-due-covid-19-impact-tourism
[3] Africa CDC, 2021. Outbreak Brief 87: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19 Pandemic). (https://africacdc.org/download/outbreak-brief-87-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-pandemic/
[4] Burns, Movsisyan et al, 2021. *International travel-related control measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid review.* Cochrane Database Syst Rev. 2021 Mar 25;3(3):CD013717. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33763851/
[5] Personal communication. Allison Glass.

- Vaccines against COVID-19 have been added to the existing Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM) as a way of managing the pandemic. Vaccines reduce the risk of severe disease, hospitalisation and death. Research also shows that vaccines reduce transmission of the virus to some extent.[6]

- With high rates of vaccination coverage in most of South Africa's trade partner countries outside Africa, international travel is opening up as vaccination is seen to reduce the risk of infection. Additional requirements however apply for those that are not vaccinated.

- Several countries now categorise travel requirements according to vaccination status. Persons who are vaccinated are no longer required to provide viral tests while unvaccinated travellers must provide proof of a negative COVID-19 viral test (nucleic acid or antigent detection) prior to departure and may be required to quarantine for up to 10 days.[7] Various permutations for further categorization of countries exist where countries are categorized as high risk or having variants of concern.

- South Africa and its neighbours are currently in a trough regarding transmission of the virus while most European countries and the US are experiencing higher rates of transmission. Vaccination rates in European countries and the US are high while, southern Africa still has significantly lower vaccination rates. Table 1 in the Annex sets out the weekly COVID-19 cases/1 000 000 and vaccination status for South Africa, its neighbouring countries, and a selected number of countries which account for historically high numbers of tourists to South Africa.

- All the above developments and evidence necessitated a review the current COVID-19 screening requirements for land, air and sea ports of entry.

Recommendations

Entry requirements to South Africa for international travellers should be approached from two perspectives; international travellers mostly arriving by air or by sea, and regional travellers arriving by land.

For entry into South Africa by air or sea (except from a neighbouring country) the following requirements should apply:

- a completed Traveller Health Questionnaire; and one of the following conditions apply:
    1. Proof of being fully vaccinated against COVID-19 at least 14 days before travel; or
    2. a valid negative COVID-19 test result, either a PCR not older than 72 hours from the date of departure from the country of origin or a rapid antigen test not older than 48 hours performed by an accredited laboratory; or
    3. Proof of recovery from COVID-19 by producing a positive PCR test result taken between 30-180 days prior to travel.
- Unvaccinated seafarers who dock in South African ports should be offered vaccinations in South Africa.

[6] CDC, 2021. Science Brief: COVID-19 Vaccines and Vaccination, 15 September 2021. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/fully-vaccinated-people.html
[7] Covid-19 and EU Travel Restrictions, 2021. https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/covid-19/

For land borders with neighbouring countries (Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe), only the following requirements should apply:

- a completed Traveller Health Questionnaire, with symptom screening at an entry point into the border offices.
- Proof of being in the neighbouring country for at least 14 days prior to travel.
- Should the person have been in a third country beyond the neighbouring countries in the past 14 days, then the requirements for arrival by air or sea will apply.

All travelers will still be requested to download the COVID-19 Alert Application.

Current symptom screening measures should continue at all ports of entry, with public health interventions to reduce transmission continued.

Rationale for recommendations

1. Many countries are adopting measures to ensure a return to normal life and economic activities. This can be achieved through continuing with current PHSMs and increasing vaccination rates.

2. The WHO recommends that Member States consider a risk-based approach to the facilitation of international travel by lifting measures, such as testing and/or quarantine requirements, to individual travellers who:
   - were fully vaccinated, at least two weeks prior to travelling, with COVID-19 vaccines listed by WHO for emergency use or approved by a stringent regulatory authority or approved by SAHPRA; or
   - have had previous SARS-CoV-2 infection as confirmed by PCR within the 6 months prior to travelling and are no longer infectious as per WHO's criteria for releasing COVID-19 patients from isolation.
   - If testing and/or quarantine requirements are lifted for travellers who meet the above-mentioned criteria, individuals who are unvaccinated or do not have proof of past infection should be offered alternatives, such the use of negative PCR tests, or antigen tests.[8]

3. The WHO further recommends that Member States do not treat international travellers as a priority group for SARS-CoV-2 testing, as they are not suspected COVID-19 cases by default. In resource limited contexts, diverting testing resources from settings where testing can have a higher public health impact should be avoided.

4. Over the course of the pandemic, possibly due to more testing capacity in South Africa than surrounding nations, it appears that the impact of neighbouring countries on the South African epidemic is minimal.

5. Testing measures instituted at the land borders are not cost effective or affordable, neither for the NHLS/Department of Health nor for travelers entering South Africa. This has impacted negatively on tourism, business travel, and economic activity in the region. Workers and small business owners such as taxis crossing the border cannot afford the cost of testing for each

[8] WHO, 2020. *Considerations for implementing a risk-based approach to international travel in the context of COVID-19. Interim guidance 16 December 2020*. Available on https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Risk-based-international-travel-2020.1.

border crossing. Instances of travelers fraudulently crossing the border without valid PCR tests have the potential to increase the opportunities for bribery and corruption.

Thank you for consideration of this advisory**.**

Kind regards

PROF KOLEKA MLISANA **PROF MARIAN JACOBS**
CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19
DATE: 15 October 2021
CC:

- **Dr N Crisp (acting Director-General: Health)**
- **Incident Management Team**

Annex

Table 1: COVID-19 transmission and vaccination status in selected countries

Country	Weekly confirmed Covid-19 cases/million	Vaccination status (fully and partically vaccinated)
South Africa	106	22%
Botswana	509	19%
Eswatini	242	19%
Lesotho	52	15%
Namibia	142	11%
Mozambique	6	6%
Zimbabwe	45	21%
France	533	75%
Germany	674	68%
United Kingdom	3531	72%
United States of America	2017	64%

Source: Our World in Data. Accessed 9 October 2021