

■ OUTCOMES

# Virus response highlights benefits of collaboration

CHARLES Dickens famously wrote in his classic novel *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity".

As the world continues to reel from the effects of the outbreak of Covid-19, it is increasingly clear that we live in an age of radical opposites and contrasts.

As the global pandemic unfolds, we are seeing pockets of wisdom prevailing and sometimes hints of foolishness abounding, where some of our communities are still not complying with the regulations.

We have also seen uncertainty and fear grip the world. However, despite these fears and uncertainties, South Africa has been swift in handling issues arising from the crisis, particularly from a health perspective.

Initially, decisive action by the South African government helped slow down the rate of infection and to date, over 2.6 million tests have been conducted.

The efforts of laboratory services and availability of testing kits, drive-through testing centres and mobile labs has also put our country in a position to be able to test people effectively.

While South Africa was able to buy valuable time to prepare for the rising infections through the extended lockdown, this pandemic has exposed the glaring gaps in the health-care

DR  
KONJI  
SEBATI



system. These include a shortage of nurses, physicians, and hospital beds.

This is exacerbated by the high prevalence of HIV, TB and other underlying conditions that render a portion of the population most at risk to be infected with Covid-19.

These shortcomings have the potential to jeopardise access to health care, and ultimately undermine achieving universal health care.

However, we know from observing the outbreak of Ebola, Sars and even Zika, that with the right measures instituted swiftly, countries can stop the transmission of a virus dead in its tracks.

We also know that countries that have weaker health-care systems are the most affected during a pandemic, therefore our goal must remain focused on slowing the spread of the virus.

We must continue to practise social distancing and self-isolation to minimise the risk of infection as well as lessen the impact on our economy.

As the economy reopens, strict health-care protocols must be adhered

to at all times to prevent the collapse of an already fragile health system.

As a nation, we are again being reminded of the importance of prioritising a functional health-care system.

The National Health Insurance Bill, already on the table, seeks to achieve universal health-care coverage and will need to take into consideration all the learnings from Covid-19.

It also needs to take into consideration the inequalities that are deeply entrenched in our society and a legacy of both our history as well as our structural restraints.

The sector will need to make provisions to rebuild the health system in a manner it takes all these factors into account.

One of the many lessons we can take from Covid-19 as the health sector is the importance of collaboration.

I am reminded of the day that the virus landed on South African soil. While we were not fully prepared as a nation for the outbreak, we had seen measures slowly being rolled out in preparation for the outbreak.

This gave us a better chance than most countries who adopted a wait-and-see approach. As time went on, public health officials, government and relevant stakeholders started singing from the same hymn sheet, issuing warnings and updates to South Africans timeously.

In the past few months, we have also seen the government and the private sector come together for the

good of the country as a whole.

Business Unity SA and Business For South Africa have played an amazing role in partnering with the government.

We have also seen competing pharmaceutical companies and researchers globally coming together in the efforts to develop a vaccine.

This is the value of collaboration: pre-existing walls between departments, sectors and organisations are coming down and so is the silo mentality.

This level of collaboration is a sure-fire way of finding solutions and implementing them with the vigour and velocity this pandemic requires.

The practise of collaboration is not a new concept. Even if it is emerging as a perfected science in this current climate.

It has been proven that collaboration of health-care professionals, government, pharmaceuticals, and stakeholders leads to better outcomes. So why not make it the norm?

To further showcase this commitment to collaboration, the Innovative Pharmaceutical Association South Africa (Ipsasa), representing 26 innovative research-based pharmaceutical companies, has pledged to continue to supply medicines to people living with chronic diseases during this time.

The outbreak of the virus has shown that the most at-risk population are people over 65 years of age with underlying conditions, including

cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease, immunosuppression, diabetes, chronic liver, or kidney disease and more.

As Ipsasa, we want to do our part and ensure that we continue to provide the medication needed to manage their conditions during the lockdown and beyond.

This assurance for patients is vital because there are possible deep vulnerabilities in global medicine supply security due to lockdown regulations in different countries – reduction of cargo flights, and reduced production and supply of active pharmaceutical ingredients; however, we assure patients that Ipsasa members have been highly alert to that possibility and doing all in its might to avert that.

Ipsasa member companies have contributed over R14 million to the Solidarity Fund.

It was particularly important to contribute because this crisis has shown us that without collaboration, there will be no progress.

Ipsasa and all its members continue to pledge to work tirelessly with other stakeholders, the World Health Organization and others, until a vaccine and specific effective medicines are found.

*Dr Sebati is chief executive of the Innovative Pharmaceuticals Association South Africa*

◆ For more information please visit the website <http://ipasa.co.za/>