

13 DECEMBER 2020

KZN HEALTH MEC APPEALS FOR CALM AND STRICTER ADHERENCE TO COVID-19 PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT PROTOCOLS

OVER the past few hours, we have been inundated with media enquiries containing allegations of healthcare workers and support staff being infected with COVID – 19, at various hospitals in and around eThekweni District.

We have also noted correspondence being widely distributed on social media, purportedly by staff, among others, alluding to these infections.

It is with a deep sense of concern that we, indeed, confirm a significant rise in COVID – 19 infections among health workers, which has become noticeable in recent weeks.

Those who have borne the brunt of COVID – 19 include our frontline staff, such as nurses, doctors, as well as allied health workers, administrative clerks, and general orderlies.

At Addington Hospital, 38 staff members have tested positive for COVID – 19 since the start of December 2020. This includes 5 doctors, 11 nursing staff, 1 allied worker, and 21 support staff members.

However, Addington Hospital continues to function, and is accepting all walk-in patients. Only those who are picked up by ambulance are being diverted to Prince Mshiyeni Memorial and King Edward VIII hospitals.

At RK Khan Hospital, the total number of staff who have tested positive is 23, which is made up of 7 Nurses, 10 doctors, 2 radiologists, 3 clerks and 1 general orderly.

Contrary to unfounded reports, RK Khan is also open and providing healthcare services, while following strict COVID – 19 infection prevention and control protocols.

On 9 December 2020, our Health Minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize, announced officially that the country is experiencing a resurgence of COVID – 19, with KwaZulu-Natal among the four provinces that are driving the spread of the virus, alongside Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and Gauteng.

It should be understood that healthcare workers and other staff who work within the health environment form part of the ecosystem of broader society.

By virtue of this, they will not be immune to epidemiological changes and other realities within society.

But beyond that, given the sensitivity of their work environment, and their higher occupational risk exposure, health workers carry an additional burden of responsibility to take care of themselves, and follow the necessary COVID – 19 precautions at all times.

HEALTH WORKERS HIT BY THE COVID – 19 SECOND WAVE

This is vital. Generally, COVID – 19 is only flaring up now, because when the COVID - 19 statistics started to go down, too many people became complacent and started assuming that the virus was no longer a threat.

This was despite our constant warning about the possibility of a COVID - 19 resurgence, and the need to adhere to the precautions.

We are now learning the hard way how wrong those assumptions were.

With the second wave now here, if the precautions are strictly followed, there actually lies an opportunity for health workers and the general South African public to buck the trend and avoid being part of the statistics from this global phenomenon.

The resurgence of COVID - 19 should be a turning point that galvanises society to work together to arrest, once and for all, the acquiring and further spread of the virus.

Where we find ourselves now need not amount to a second wave of panic, which helps no-one; and instead sows fear, stigmatisation and the discrimination of staff and patients from those affected facilities.

Having been exposed to the first outbreak of COVID - 19 earlier this year, all of us ought to be wiser this time around, having learnt a number of valuable lessons.

Chief among those lessons has been the need for us as Government to ensure, as we have, that there is always sufficient Personal Protective Equipment; as well as to ensure that all staff are trained on its correct usage, in line with protocols.

A total of 7 451 health care workers (HCWs) have been infected with COVID-19 in the public sector since the beginning of the pandemic.

Of the total infected, 91 (1%) have sadly succumbed to the disease.

The majority of the infected health care workers (IHCW) were nurses (57%), followed by doctors at 6%, with the balance coming from other categories.

COVID – 19 UPDATES AND IMPACT ON HEALTH WORKERS

Over the past 24-hour reporting period, KwaZulu-Natal has reported 1613 new COVID – 19 cases, which brings the total number of infections to 139 366.

At least 120 207 people have recovered. Sadly, there have been 4 new deaths in KZN, bringing the number of fatalities to 3457.

As at Saturday, 12 December 2020, the province had 1 335 patients admitted in both private (n=941, 70%) and public (n=394, 30%) hospitals.

Of those admitted, 169 patients (13%) required intensive care services. Private hospitals had more patients in ICU (87%, n=147) than public facilities (13%, n=22).

Among those who required intensive care, 37% (n=62) were ventilated in both private (74%, n=46) and public (26%, n=16) facilities.

Other patients, 10% (n=128) were admitted in high care units.

OPERATIONAL BED OCCUPANCY STATUS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Of the total available isolation beds (n=919), 57% are vacant, while from the total ICU beds (n=85) allocated in the public sector, 26% are currently occupied.

DISINFECTION PROTOCOLS

In line with COVID – 19 prevention and management protocols, where staff or patients have tested positive, the affected areas are decontaminated, while contact staff get tested and put on quarantine.

STATE OF READINESS

The number of admissions is increasing daily, but we are confident that we will be able to cope.

We are ready, thanks to the staff that we recruited and extra bed capacity that has been prepared throughout the province.

CALL TO PUBLIC ACTION

We wish to re-iterate that now is not the time to panic, or point fingers, or despair.

We appreciate the courageous and gallant manner in which healthcare workers have helped us fight COVID – 19, and we call upon them to, at all times, remain alive to the high risk that they face.

We call upon them to soldier on, use established channels to air any work-related grievance that they might have.

Now is the time for us to use the collective wisdom that we have gained in the recent past, to stand up against the virus and boldly declare: never again.

Never again should we succumb to a virus that we now understand better, which does not move on its own, but gets moved by us.

Now is the time for us to apply stricter adherence to prevention measures by wearing our masks when we venture to the public.

Now is the time for us to avoid congregating in large groups.

Let us wash our hands regularly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and keep a distance of at least two metres between ourselves and other people.