

EDITORIAL COMMENT: Hear no evil: Mkhize axes the critics from his expert's panel Rob Rose: Financial Mail, 30 September 2020

WITS professor Glenda Gray, who famously clashed with Health Minister Zweli Mkhize in May, when she pointed out the idiocy of the lockdown rules, was this week excluded from his new ministerial advisory committee (MAC) on Covid-19. It is a curious move: as an acclaimed HIV/Aids scientist, she is not only the president of the Medical Research Council (MRC), but in 2017 was also named one of Time magazine's Top 100 most influential people. But she is in good company: two other outspoken scientists on Mkhize's previous advisory committee, Prof Shabir Madhi and Prof Francois Venter, who publicly criticised the more looney-tunes lockdown rules, have also been cut from the new MAC. But is Mkhize really entitled to do as he pleases? He is, after all, constitutionally obliged to act in the best interests of SA, taking the best decisions he can to counter Covid-19. So, if he axed the scientists for daring to speak out against the insanity of certain government decisions (think the booze ban or allowing taxis to go to 100 percent loading), you could argue he doesn't really have as much carte blanche as he thinks. Gray said maybe he wants fresh thinking on the new MAC, or maybe he thinks that he can still call us any time, which he can. But, she said, if public trust is important, he ought to be transparent about these decisions. And restoring public trust - shattered by obvious contradictions in the lockdown rules and splintered by the deaths of Collins Khosa and Nathaniel Julies by the army and Bheki Cele's gun-toting Keystone Kops - is vital right now. Experts on human behaviour. On Monday, Mkhize said it would be "furthest from the truth" to suggest he disbanded the initial MAC because he didn't want to heed the scientists' advice. He admitted the government didn't follow all the scientific advice (he claims 95 percent of it was acted on), but added that those who persist in claiming that government has not heeded the advice of the MAC on Covid-19 "are dishonest". But in that statement, he does not explain why those troublemakers were not included in the new committee, saying rather that he has chosen to "augment" the MAC to avert a second wave by bringing on experts on human behaviour. In other words, Mkhize would have you believe it is just a miraculous coincidence that the three most outspoken scientists happen to have been excluded from the new MAC. If you think Mkhize wouldn't be so prickly, consider his outrage in May, when Gray's critique - that the government had ignored the experts, and that "e-commerce doesn't cause Covid" - embarrassed a government constantly stumbling over its own feet. Mkhize accused her of making "false" statements, while his former director-general, Anban Pillay, asked the MRC to "investigate her conduct". Great working relationship Since then, Gray says this relationship has healed. She said she would like to believe that excluding her from the new MAC isn't an act of retribution. She added that since May, she and the Minister have developed a great working relationship, and even coauthored a scientific paper. Excluding Madhi and Venter is equally curious. Gray said both had only ever been forthright and spoke truth to power. She said that if there is any scientific expert on Covid-19 in this country, it is Shabir Madhi. He eats, breathes and sleeps respiratory viruses, so not having him on the new MAC is sad for the country, and for Mkhize. Since the outbreak, Madhi has spent about 90 percent of his time on Covid-19 - working on the vaccine trial, as well as specific outcome studies, like its impact on pregnancy. Does Madhi believe his exclusion was retribution for being so outspoken? He said he would hope not - it would be very infantile if that were the case. Madhi said he takes the government at its word, that it believes it is at a different stage of the pandemic and needs a different set of expertise. He said he is not disappointed to have been excluded and in the previous MAC, outside experts were still invited in occasionally, so believes he can contribute outside of the MAC. Venter has never minced his words about the government's ham-fisted response - and he isn't about to do so now. He said some of the MAC

became a political embarrassment for Mkhize, since they didn't just roll over and praise the government's political decisions. They expected us to say "Well done on the tobacco ban, well done on the booze ban", and instead we pointed out how these decisions didn't stack up scientifically. It is no surprise Venter believes that reconstituting the MAC is simply a way to get rid of the dissidents. Which isn't to say those left are all yes-men - it's just that if Mkhize is serious about tackling any second wave, it is odd that he would jettison rare epidemiological skills. Ever gracious, Gray said the new MAC has "lots of expertise", but says there are "some gaps", particularly when it comes to epidemiologists. Instead, Mkhize has also created a new "behavioural MAC", whose members include leaders from the Mormon church, trade unions and the traditional healers' association. In his statement, Mkhize argued that the new MACs "more accurately reflect the needs of this country's health and economic response". Coincidentally, they also reflect the needs of an embarrassment-averse ruling party. Back to Contents Africa sets Covid-19 example despite infrastructure problems Alexander Winning: Cape Times, 30 September 2020 AFRICA'S overburdened public health systems, dearth of testing facilities and overcrowded suburbs had experts predicting a disaster when Covid-19 hit the continent in February. The new coronavirus was already wreaking havoc in Asian and European nations, and a UN agency said in April that, even with social distancing measures, the virus could kill 300 000 Africans this year. In May, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned that 190 000 people on the continent could die if containment measures failed. Yet as the world marks 1-million Covid-19 deaths, Africa is doing much better than expected, with a lower percentage of deaths than other continents. The continent's case fatality count stands at 2.4 percent, with roughly 35 000 deaths among the more than 1.4-million people reported infected with Covid-19, according to data as of Monday. In North America, it is 2.9 percent and in Europe 4.5 percent. Hard-hit countries such as Italy and Britain have recorded fatality counts of 11.6 percent and 9 percent respectively, compared with 1.6 percent for Ethiopia, 1.9 percent for Nigeria and 2.4 percent for South Africa, the continent's worst affected country. Rashida Ferrand, a London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine professor working at the Parirenyatwa Group of Hospitals in the Zimbabwean capital Harare, said based on what we have seen so far, it is unlikely that we are going to see anything at the scale that we are seeing in Europe - both in terms of infections and mortality. Scientists and public health experts have cited several possible factors, including the continent's youthful population and lessons learned from previous disease outbreaks. Professor Salim Abdool Karim, a South African infectious disease specialist who has advised the government on Covid-19, said there is a lot of circumstantial evidence, "but there is no smoking gun". Back to Contents