

Gauteng hospitals ready for Covid-19 patients, says health MEC – The Citizen 12 March 2020

When Gauteng Health MEC Bandile Masuku was sworn in last year, he committed to turning the dysfunctional department around. *Spotlight* sat down with Masuku to talk about staff morale, Covid-19, NHI, Mamelodi Hospital, and more.

It's been a stressful week for Gauteng Health MEC Bandile Masuku as the potential spread of Covid-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) piles pressure on his already strained portfolio.

Four new cases of Covid-19 were announced in Gauteng on Wednesday 11 March.

According to a statement released by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on Wednesday morning, the four infected Gauteng residents are a 33-year-old woman who travelled to Italy and returned to South Africa on March 1; a 34-year-old man and his 33-year-old wife who returned from Germany on March 9; and a 57-year-old man who travelled to Austria and Italy, returning on March 9.

This brings the total number of Covid-19 cases in South Africa to 13.

Covid-19 – on high alert

On Tuesday, after visiting South Africa's second Covid-19 positive patient at Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital, Masuku declared the 37-year-old woman well and "out and about".

Speaking to *Spotlight* following the visit, he said: "She is well. We're just waiting for the last swab test results taken this morning. But she is ready to go home; she is asymptomatic, no sneezing, no coughing, no nothing. She was walking around. She is out and about, I mean it's a big ward."

The woman was discharged soon after Masuku's visit.

He added that no staff who treated the woman, who was in an isolation ward at the hospital, were thought to be infected.

"No staff have been infected, not that we know of," he said. "But all of them covered themselves when they entered that space. Staff are wearing protective gowns, hats, gloves and masks."

He said a total of 30 beds have been readied to treat Covid-19 patients at three Gauteng hospitals: Charlotte Maxeke Hospital, Steve Biko Academic Hospital and Tembisa Provincial Tertiary Hospital.

"The virus affects the lungs," said Masuku. "This is why most of the patients come in with respiratory problems, pneumonia and shortness of breath. Protocol has been identified which we are working on in terms of medication and support. It's supportive treatment, which deals

mainly with the symptoms. Quarantine is key. So, at these designated hospitals we have created space to isolate people.”

He said South Africans returning from Italy would be kept in isolation.

“We’re dealing with scenarios. I mean Italy is on lockdown. We are expecting that not a lot of people will be returning from Italy at the moment. If they do come back from Italy and they don’t have the symptoms, even then they will have to be isolated for a period of time, which is 10 to 14 days, when we will do a swab to check if there are any virus particles in their bodies.”

Most of South Africa’s 13 cases were people who recently travelled to Italy.

Better to be conscious

Asked how the potential spread of Covid-19 would affect Gauteng’s already pressured public hospitals, Masuku said he was optimistic that the virus would be contained.

“It is those with a risk of exposure and a history of travelling. It can be contained, it’s a matter of us working together, as the public, as citizens. And it starts with regular hygienic practices that need to be observed. Like, washing hands. If you’re going to shake hands, you should wash your hands afterwards. I see everybody is now doing the elbow bump. It’s better to be conscious than to be affected.”

Indeed. At the start of an interview with *Spotlight* at the Gauteng legislature last week, Masuku declined to shake hands. “These are preventative measures,” he said.

On May 28, Masuku was sworn in as Gauteng’s MEC for Health, inheriting a department described by Premier David Makhura as “on its knees”. This was despite receiving the biggest portion — R50-billion — of the provincial budget. At the time, Masuku voiced his commitment to turning the department around.

The case of Mamelodi Hospital

On the same day as Masuku’s inauguration last year, 76-year-old patient Martha Marais was found handcuffed to a steel bench at Mamelodi Hospital in Pretoria. Since then, Masuku has appointed a new chief executive officer at Mamelodi Hospital — Dr Naing Soe — one of 11 such appointments around the province.

“I last visited Mamelodi Hospital last year,” said Masuku. “But we spent a lot of time going there. I think it was one of the places which was over-visited, by so many different stakeholders. Portfolio committee members, the Human Rights Commission, members of the opposition parties. So, there’s been a lot of attention.

“This year I want to give Dr Soe time to institute what he thinks would be the best turnaround plan for the place. And I think for the past few months, he has done well. I think he has corrected some basic things. This I see from feedback by people who I didn’t even send. People who just go there on their own. The cleanliness, you know, the flow in casualty. So, I’m confident that with more work, upgrades at the maternity ward, that all this will help with the flow of patients.”

Speaking from a boardroom inside the legislature building in central Johannesburg, Masuku poured himself a cup of coffee.

“I think Dr Soe’s experience speaks volumes,” he said. “And it was significant to choose him for Mamelodi. As I said, Mamelodi will always be a benchmark for me. Dr Soe turned around Tshwane [District Hospital] in a short space of time, and his legacy lives on there. But I also think it’s good for him to have a change of scenery, to navigate new challenges.”

Boosting staff morale

Meanwhile, in October Masuku launched an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) programme aimed at boosting the morale of health staff in Gauteng.

“We launched it at Tembisa, coincidentally,” he said. “So, we’ve been doing a lot of work in terms of recognition. One of the things we did; I also felt that it was a bit cheesy. On my birthday we created a giant cupcake sculpture of the Mpilo app. (A patient engagement mobile application, launched by the department in September). So, these cupcakes we distributed to all the staff members in the head office.

“We are also giving monthly certificates of recognition of hard work, commendations of staff who do extra work. Also, for the first time in six or seven years, the department had an end of year function.”

Masuku is enthusiastic about the Mpilo app. At this stage, 2,000 people have downloaded it. He said they are developing the app to help with Covid-19 screenings.

“And the other thing about EVP, what we have done is to recruit staff for posts at facilities. Just the issue of filling up posts,” said Masuku. “We have been working tirelessly, at different things. I don’t want to be one who plans forever. We execute.”

Spotlight’s interview with Masuku followed on Premier David Makhura’s State of the Province Address (SOPA) on February 26.

NHI and concerns about corruption

The following day, Masuku’s SOPA debate speech focused primarily on the proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) legislation. In his speech, he said: “We must complete the puzzle and the ingredients that will make a uniquely South African model of universal healthcare successful.”

When *Spotlight* asked Masuku about concerns over possible corruption in the proposed NHI Fund, he admitted that these concerns around the NHI becoming a conduit for corruption, as raised by Gauteng Shadow Health MEC Jack Bloom, among others, were well-founded.

“I think it’s a fair anxiety,” he said. “We also share the same anxiety. But I feel that we are learning as we speak, on how we are going to increase our vigilance and our transparency. And I think watching the Zondo Commission, and all that, it gives us good lessons on how we have to improve accountability and improve our systems, you know, going forward.” **MC**

**This article was produced by [Spotlight](#) – health journalism in the public interest.*