

# **SUMMARY OF GENERAL NEWS HIGHLIGHTS**

## **Effects of Covid-19**

### ***Neuro-psychological effects of Covid-19***

“Doctors in the US discovered that 40% of patients with Covid-19 displayed neurological manifestations, and of those, more than 30% has impaired cognition,” wrote Daniel Greenslade, a Clinical Psychologist in Benoni.

“These cognitive effects appear to be in the domains of Memory, Attention, Processing Speed, and Executive Functions; which research noted patients displayed subtle deficits for a period of time afterwards.”

In a newsletter, distributed by the Clinical Psychology Forum (CPF), Greenslade (MA Psychology, MA Neuropsychology (WITS) discusses the neuropsychological effects of COVID-19.

### ***Covid knocks three years off life expectancy***

In July: The latest data from Statistics SA, show that the significant rise in deaths (about 34%) in 2021 meant a drop of 3.1 years in the 2021 life expectancy at birth for SA. The data reflects the death toll between 1 July last year and 30 June this year.

Key findings of STATSSA’s mid-year population report:

- On 5 March last year, South Africa recorded its first case of Covid.
- By 11 March last year, the World Health Organisation had declared Covid to be a global pandemic.
- South Africa’s first Covid-related death occurred on 27 March last year.
- Life expectancy at birth for this year is estimated at 59.3 years for males and 64.6 years for females.
- Gauteng still comprises the largest share of the South African population, with approximately 15.81 million people (26.3%).
- KwaZulu-Natal is the province with the second largest population, with an estimated 11.5 million people (19.1%).
- With a population of approximately 1.30 million people (2.2%), Northern Cape remains the province with the smallest share of the South African population.
- Approximately 51.1% (about 30.75 million) of the population is female.
- Significant rise in deaths in 2021 [about 34%] meant a drop in 2021 life expectancy at birth for SA.

### ***Covid-19 has extreme impact on children's healthcare***

The global Covid-19 pandemic has had an extreme impact on children's lives in ways that will be felt for years to come, according to health experts – **Health-e News** (8 September 2021).

According to the Children and Covid advocacy brief series, developed by the Children's Institute, primary healthcare services for children under five dropped by almost 25%, leading to a decrease in the screening and treatment of acute malnutrition, HIV and tuberculosis (TB).

### ***'Pandemic sends ADHD symptoms into overdrive'***

The increase of up to 80% in time spent in front of screens since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a spike in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms. – **TimesLive** (15 September 2021)

Psychiatrist professor Renata Schoeman, convener of the ADHD special interest group of the SA Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP), said studies in China, India, Australia, Canada, the US and UK pointed to excessive screen time during the pandemic associated with worsening of ADHD symptoms. There has also been a rise in the number of adults experiencing ADHD-type.

Excessive screen time, either watching TV or using devices including laptops, mobile phones and tablets, negatively affected concentration, memory and learning, and contributed to problems with sleep, obesity, depression and anxiety - and aggravated symptoms of ADHD.

ADHD is the most common psychiatric disorder in children, affecting 1 in 20 youngsters, and follows about 65% of them into adulthood, affecting about 1-million adults in SA.

### ***Covid-19 increased rate of mental distress***

The SA Depression and Anxiety Group has flagged rising rates of mental distress since Covid-19 struck, reporting a 48% increase in calls to its helpline in the nine months to September, compared with the year before. Discovery Health Medical Scheme revealed that psychology visits per 1 000 lives in July 2021 were 16.2% higher than in the corresponding period in 2019. According to the estimates in the **Lancet** study, published on October 8, countries hit hardest by the pandemic in 2020 had the greatest increases in mental illnesses, with SA among the worst affected.

The incidence of anxiety disorders rose by more than 36%, while depression soared by 38%.

Globally, anxiety disorders jumped by 26% and depression rose by 28% above pre-pandemic levels.

According to Western Cape's top health official, Keith Cloete, the province has experienced a steady increase in the number of people with acute psychotic and behavioural disorders arriving at hospital emergency centres in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

According to the latest survey of the National Income Dynamics Study Coronavirus Rapid Mobile (Nids-Cram) more than half (52%) of the respondents had experienced depressive symptoms at some point during the pandemic.

### **General News on Covid-19**

#### ***Apathy and hesitancy lead to lack of demand for jobs***

"COVID vaccinations almost halved in the last week of November compared with the same period the month before, and more than half of adults in SA - about 57%, or 22.8-m - are still not immunised, reported **Sunday Times** (5 December 2021).

According to Wits University vaccinology professor Shabir Madhi a combination of apathy and hesitancy contributed to the lack of demand. Madhi said the hesitancy is fuelled by mixed messaging from government and earlier by its advisers, casting doubts about how vaccines would protect against even severe disease due to Beta.

This is compounded by misinformation that has run rampant. Department of Health spokesperson Foster Mohale said there are enough vaccines, human resource and vaccination sites. He blamed fake news and misinformation for the slow rate.

Prof Francois Venter from the Wits faculty of health sciences said mandates would boost vaccination but they would push up numbers only where they were applied, such as workplaces or restaurants.

- Meanwhile, ***Business Day*** (6 December 2021) reported that almost two-thirds of healthcare workers in one of the world's biggest Covid-19 vaccine trials (Sisonke) have not yet taken booster shots, "and they only have 10 working days to do so,". By 4 December, participants who have taken a booster shot accounted for only 37% of the Sisonke trial group. "It is expected the second phase of the trial will offer "critical data" on the interaction between Omicron and those with and without a J&J booster shot. This research would inform the government's stance on booster shots."

### ***Most blue surgical masks ineffective against COVID-19 — Canada study***

In September ***MedicalBrief*** reported that, according to a Canadian study (University of Waterloo), most blue surgical face masks used by many during the pandemic are not enough to avoid people from being infected with COVID-19. The study found that the blue cloth surgical masks that have become popular during the pandemic filter only 10% of aerosol droplets, as they do not cover the face properly. The N95, filtered more than 50% of aerosol droplets while the other half is dispersed above the wearer's head.

### ***'To beat Covid, fight HIV too'***

"HIV has become a 'side issue' and might never regain its prominent position on the public health radar," said epidemiologist, Prof Salim Abdool Karim, on World Aids Day. - ***Sunday Times*** (5 December 2021).

In an article in science journal ***Nature***, SA clinicians and scientists call on governments everywhere to devote more attention and resources to interactions between Covid and HIV. Studies from before the rollout of Covid-19 vaccines show that people with HIV are 30% -50% more likely to die from Covid-19.

"Failure to tackle the pandemic with sufficient urgency in countries with high rates of uncontrolled, advanced HIV could lead to the emergence of variants of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that spread more easily between people or render the vaccines less effective. Conversely, both diseases could be curbed more effectively if they are tackled simultaneously, with public health responses strengthened by the lessons learnt from both," according to the article.

### ***More general highlights***

### ***Ordinary breathing behind most TB transmission***

Researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) have cast doubt on the long-held belief that coughing is the main means of spreading tuberculosis (TB), presenting new research at international conference that found regular breathing may be a far bigger contributor. – ***Business Day*** (20 October 2021).

The UCT scientists used a specially constructed chamber to study the relative contribution of coughing, deep breathing and regular, or “tidal”, breathing to the expulsion of tiny aerosols containing *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, the bacteria that causes TB. They found tidal breathing contributed 90% of the aerosols expelled by an infected person, challenging the belief that coughing produced most of these droplets. The findings suggest the current approach to TB control, which relies on testing and treating people who feel sick enough to seek care, may not be sufficient.

### ***Single brain scan predicts tipping point for symptom onset in Alzheimer's***

“Researchers at Washington University School of Medicine in St Louis have developed an algorithm-based approach, using data from a kind of brain scan known as amyloid positron emission tomography (PET) to gauge brain levels of the key Alzheimer's protein amyloid beta.

Amyloid PET scans are used widely in Alzheimer's research, and this algorithm represents a new way of analysing such scans to approximate when symptoms will arise.

The power of this new technique is that it requires just one brain scan, plus the person's age. With that data, the model can estimate the time to symptom onset, plus or minus several years. In this study, the correlation between the expected age of symptom onset and the true age at diagnosis was better than 0.9 on a scale of 0 (no correlation) to 1 (perfect correlation).” – ***MedicalBrief*** (30 September 2021)