

‘Minister erred in sidelining of state institutions’

Eric Naki

The tension among members of the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) advising Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on Covid-19 has boiled over, and that’s what could have led to one of the members openly criticising the government’s regulations.

According to experts, Mkhize blundered when he sidelined state institutions, the SA Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and opted for Professor Salim Abdool Karim, director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) to lead the panel.

Political analyst Xolani Dube, head of the Xubera Institution for Research and Development, questioned the rationale behind Mkhize’s appointment of Karim, instead of giving the role to Prof Glenda Gray, who is SAMRC chief executive and president, or Prof Janusz Paweska, head of NICD.

The pair were forced to play second fiddle to Karim when state protocol required that state resources be utilised in a crisis like Covid-19.

Another analyst, Prof Lesiba Teffo, lashed out at the health department, including Mkhize and acting director-general Anban Pillay, for dictating to intellectuals like Gray and others about what they’re allowed to say about the lockdown.

He was reacting to Pillay’s statement in which he criticised Gray, a member of MAC, for objecting to the government risk-adjusted strategy on Covid-19 that she described as “unscientific”. Gray had told News24 that MAC was not part of the decision to ease the lockdown.

Pillay was reported at the weekend as saying that Gray had overstepped the mark given that implementation of the regulations was not within the MAC’s jurisdiction.

“Professor Gray is a professor in infectious diseases, paediatrics and vaccinology, but not in implementation or easing of a lockdown,” he said.

Dube questioned that Caprisa, a private institution, could

be leading the government in how to combat Covid-19 instead of MRC and NICD.

“The SAMRC, the NICD and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research are overshadowed by Caprisa,” he said.

He said the leading role could have been offered to Gray or Paweska, instead of Karim.

On the lockdown regulations, Teffo lambasted Pillay saying: “You can’t muscle out intellectuals, you can’t invite them and say you are allowed to speak on this but not on that. You cannot prescribe that they cannot speak on the lockdown but only on science matters.”

The department of health did not respond to requests for comment at the time of going to press.