

# Professor warns of rise in infections after lockdown

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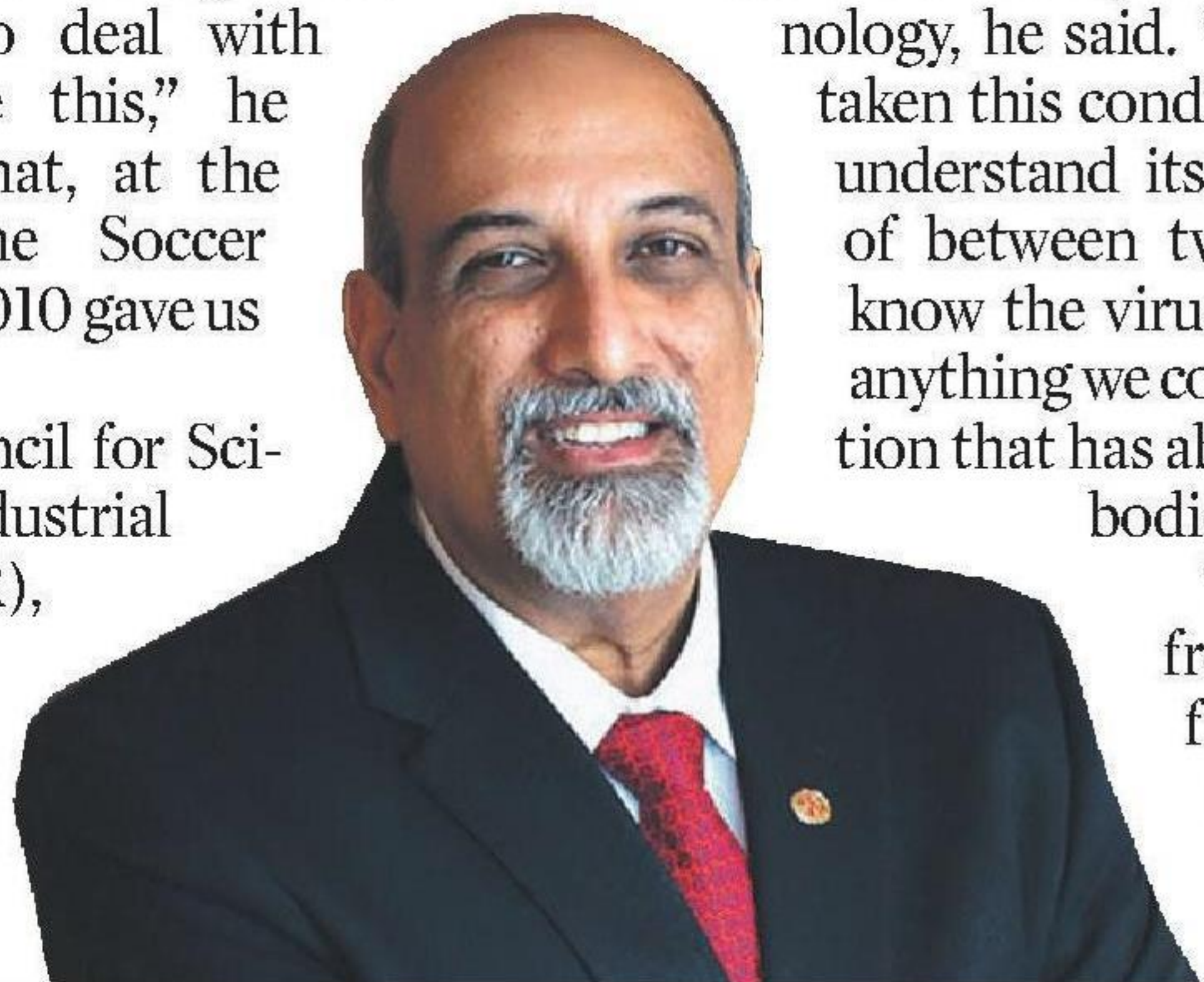
PROFESSOR Salim Abdool Karim (**pictured**), the government's chief adviser on Covid-19, has unequivocally warned that there will be an increase in number of infections after the lockdown is lifted.

But a strategy, involving cellphone technology, data and an ops room set up for the 2010 World Cup is in place to help flatten the curve.

Karim, who was speaking at a webinar hosted by the University of KwaZulu Natal's Data@breakfast monthly session, said while there was not much prospect of infections not taking off, they were "not going to sit by and let it do so".

"Nobody ever thought we would need to deal with something like this," he said, adding that, at the very least, the Soccer World Cup in 2010 gave us an edge.

"At the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), we had put in place an amazing ops centre for the World Cup. It



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is a wall full of big television screens showing maps of the country, where police stations are and so on. What we now had to do was add data into the system of where the cases are.”

That's where the community health workers come in, using cellphone technology, he said. "Those who have taken this condition seriously and understand its reproductive rate of between two and three will know the virus has an edge over anything we could do in a population that has absolutely zero antibodies".

The recent spike is from infections from the beginning of lockdown.

Positive laboratory results,

he said, pertained to infections that occurred, on average, two weeks prior. What we are seeing now in terms of the spike is a result of improved data from the roll out of the community health-care worker programme.

"The first two weeks of cases that we see after lockdown actually occurred before the lockdown. The third week of lockdown is probably our best indicator of infections that occurred straight after the lockdown," he explained.

He said the initial phase of closing schools, preventing gatherings from March 16 until the lockdown "had a marked impact that took our daily number of cases to quite a low level".

"Now this week what we are seeing is the results from the first week of the lockdown but it is not a clear indicator as this phase also coincided with the roll-

ing out of mass community health worker screening programmes.

"In the past seven days we have had more than a million screenings taking place, of which 10 000 cases were referred for testing. Our goal is to do a million screenings in one week."

Learning from countries ahead of us, Karim said others had underestimated "the enemy". "Some people thought they could outwit this virus, that you didn't need to really tackle it head on, and that you could either try to achieve herd immunity by allowing natural infection [particularly in young people in whom it is quite mild], or you take partial protection measures allowing a spread to occur while protecting the elderly."

He said these strategies were not effective elsewhere.

Karim also said the virus' impact on HIV-positive people is unknown, and he expressed concern about the impact on those with low CD4 counts who are not on anti-retroviral treatment.

There are about 2,5 million South Africans who are not on anti-retroviral treatment — of which about 500 000 had low CD4 counts. "I hope I'm wrong but we can expect the fatality rate in this group to be similar to what we've seen here and abroad with the elderly."

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