

Covid-19 briefing is impressive

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I LISTENED to the Covid-19 public briefing with Prof Abdool Karim on Monday this week.

I think South Africa's Covid-19 health response is in stark contrast to the frankly crazy Aids denialism that marked the early days of the HIV response in South Africa in the late 1990s.

We still see the ravages of this with an orphaned generation, abject poverty and high HIV rates because of the lack of early treatment as a preventative strategy. South Africa has, however, learnt from such previous indiscretions. Let's hope and pray that our vastly different and highly proactive Covid-19 response will have positive benefits now and in the years to come.

I think the briefing was the best Covid-19 conference I have as yet watched from anywhere around the world.

Prof Karim provided an easily understandable and graphic depiction of the South African Covid-19 trajectory and predictions. It was honest and transparent and gave the public high-level information that is being evaluated by the President's National Command Council for Covid-19 to make decisions regarding lockdown and the medical response to the disease.

This helps citizens understand the reasons why the government implemented and extended the nationwide lockdown. It made me confident as a citizen and a doctor that our leaders have a plan and learnt from other countries' successes and failures.

Politicians have respected medical/scientific experts and implemented their recommendations from an early stage. They have not resorted to maligning medical experts or scientists for stating medical facts that are inconvenient to the administration.

The health minister, Dr Mkhize, also acknowledged shortcomings and did not resort to placing blame on everyone else, including the World Health Organization. In fact, we had a WHO representative participating in the conference.

The minister did not attempt to use Covid-19 to further any party-political agenda. This is by comparison to some industrialised western nations' handling of the pandemic.

I think this time could be a significant nation-building exercise for South Africa. Winning the Afcon and the Rugby World Cup provide temporary national euphoria, but they do not truly affect the social, economic lives and survival of our citizens.

Problems often cited by South Africans up till now include crime, corruption and maladministration. For the first time in our democratic history we are faced with a global crisis that transcends racial, religious, social and economic lines. This crisis demands solutions that are inclusive of everyone.

We are a nation with collective resolve and ingenious thinkers. We have pioneered heart transplantation, CT scanning, dolos (coastal barriers), designed the Rooivalk helicopter, among others, and averted civil war. We should not underestimate ourselves and, as the Afrikaans saying goes, we "maak 'n plan". Who is to say making ventilators or finding a vaccine are beyond our scope?

Our resolution to abide by social distancing and forsake a braai, party, wedding or religious gathering will have tangible consequences on our parents, gogos, friends, family and neighbours. Our generosity to contribute to funds to help businesses or impoverished families will be put to the test when all our incomes are shrinking. It is truly a time when small sacrifices on an individual basis can help benefit the collective.

This is a true test of our spirit of ubuntu. In the not-so-distant future, when we have overcome the pandemic (Allah/God willing) the gestures of the rich and middle class to alleviate the suffering of the poor, the actions of the young and strong to protect the old and the sick, will not be forgotten. They will help to forge new bonds of togetherness and a new South Africa.

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