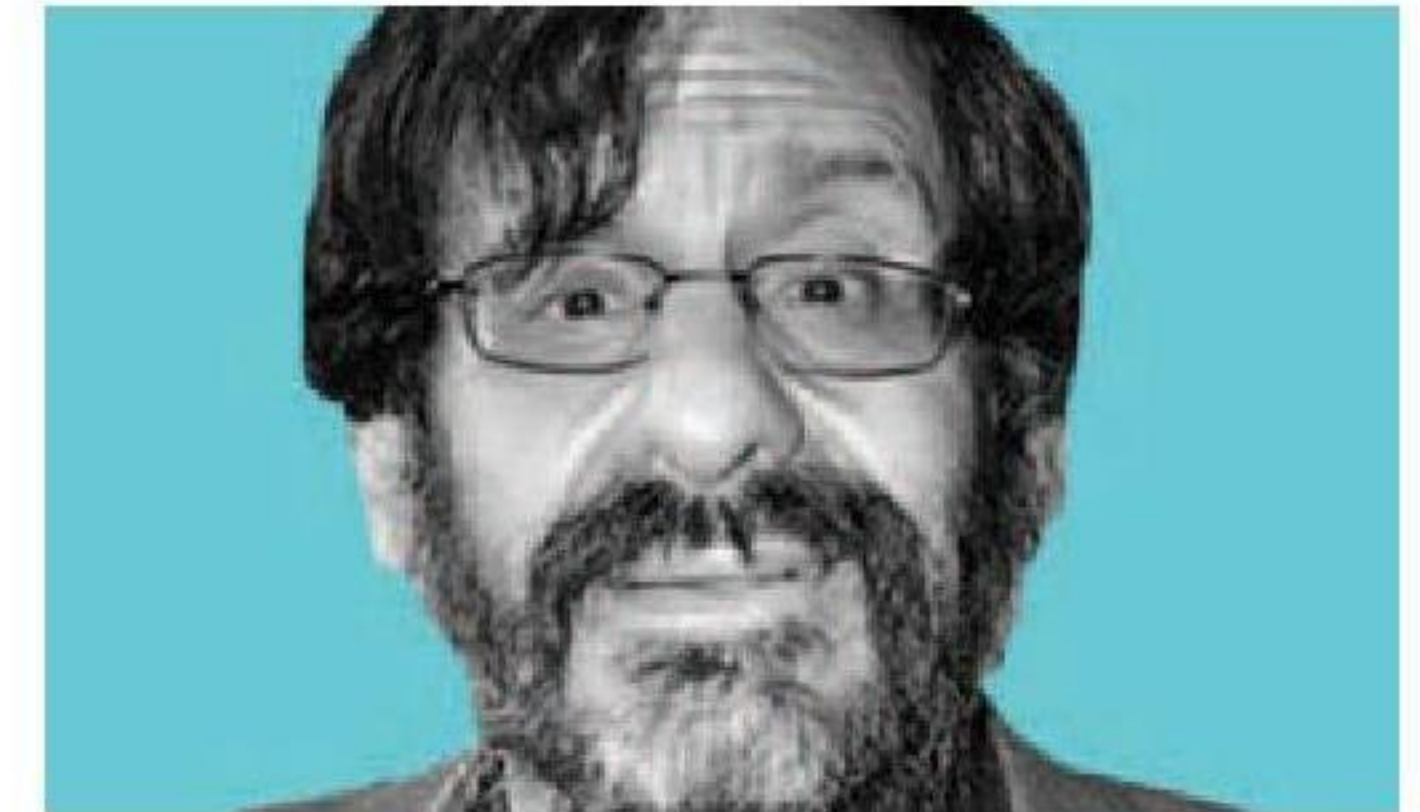


CORONAVIRUS

Dangerous when scientists doublespeak like politicians

Why doesn't this country want to beat Covid-19? Asking this must seem ridiculous in the midst of a lockdown. But the issue is not whether the country is doing anything about the disease; it is why it is doing it. The government sends us two messages. First, we must do everything we can to protect ourselves and others from the virus. Second, we will fail because, whatever we do, many infections and deaths are inevitable.



STEVEN FRIEDMAN

This second message may have begun with its chief scientific adviser, Salim Abdool Karim, who stresses that a "severe epidemic" is inevitable. Lest we don't know what that means, he says the country must prepare for many

bereavements. His reason is that no other country has avoided this. His message is regularly repeated by the government and seems to lie at the heart of its strategy. But the claim is wrong. Yes, the virus is everywhere and will be until there is a vaccine. South Korea was reminded of this when it opened bars, and infections resumed; so was Germany, when it announced that football would restart and players tested positive. But a "severe epidemic" is not inevitable. So far, several countries and

territories have sharply limited illnesses and deaths. They all had outbreaks, contained them, and are down to a few, if any, cases and very few deaths. They include South Korea, New Zealand and the Indian state of Kerala. There are others but these all have free media so their numbers are more reliable. It is easy to see why governments would want to claim that suffering is inevitable when it isn't – it means that whatever happens is not their fault. We are being told that Western Cape has as many infections as all other provinces

combined because its "inevitable" surge in cases is happening earlier than everywhere else. But if the rise isn't inevitable, the truth may not be that provinces where infections rise sharply are ahead but that they are behind because they are not containing Covid-19. The defeatism has also been seized on by those who want to imitate right-wingers elsewhere in the world by demanding that restrictions end: if mass pain is inevitable, why try to prevent it? But why are scientists telling us mass suffering is inevitable

when it isn't? Presumably because they know other countries can contain Covid-19 but fear we can't. Where does this message leave us? We are usually told we must protect the country from something that will happen anyway because this will ensure the health system is ready. But this only makes sense if doing this will save lives. This is not obvious. There is no cure for Covid-19, and if there is a severe epidemic many people may die even if the health system is ready. So the science on Covid-19 is

not as clear as we are told. We should stop treating even renowned scientists as if they are all-knowing and should ask them and the politicians hard questions. The most obvious is why we can't emulate those places that have kept the virus at bay. There is also a wider question that our refusal to question scientists has left unanswered: what has to happen here to keep the number of illnesses and deaths as low as possible? To answer that we need to see the evidence on which the

predictions are based. We should also insist on being told how we will know whether the health system is ready, what has been done to get it ready and whether ill people who don't have Covid-19 are paying the price of getting it ready. If we don't insist on answers from the scientists and politicians, we are giving them a blank cheque that can only add to our pain. ● *Friedman is research professor with the humanities faculty of the University of Johannesburg.*