DANGEROUS WHEN SCIENTISTS DOUBLESPEAK LIKE POLITICIANS

Why don'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 seems to have two messages. First, we must do everything we can to protect ourselves and contain the virus. Second, we will fall because, whatever we do, many infections and deaths are inevitable.

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, New Zealand and the Indian state of Kerala are others. There are others who have all these free media so their numbers are more reliable. Where 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 abroad but that they are behind because they are not containing Covid-19.

The dole of the wellbeing has also been seized on by those who want to imitate right-wing after another 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 better than we can.

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 is the one thing we can sense if doing this will save lives. This is obviously. 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 happened here to keep the number of infections 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 till 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.

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