

PANDEMIC

Young activist sparked battle

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IT HAS been two decades since the death of activist Nkosi Johnson, the 12-year-old who brought the HIV and Aids pandemic into the spotlight, a move that has subsequently helped fight Covid-19, according to experts.

World Aids Day was on Wednesday and while Covid-19 has grabbed the global spotlight, together they created the Beta variant that drove the country's second wave.

According to UNAIDS, in 2020, 38 million people were recorded to be living with HIV and there were 690 000 deaths. There were 1.5 million new infections during the same period, amounting to about 4 000 new infections daily.

The global target was to reduce new infections to 500 000 for 2020, but while that target was missed, the number of people on antiretroviral therapy was bolstered. In 2010 there were 7.5 million people getting therapy and now, according to the latest figures, that number was 27.4 million.

About 70% of all cases were in Africa with one in every four infections being a young woman.

The Centre for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, US, tracks the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Data from their Coronavirus Research Centre's dashboard revealed that since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, there have been about 264 million cases and 5 237 087 deaths.

Clinical epidemiologist Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim said while the HIV and Aids epidemic had continued to baffle the world's best and brightest for decades, the strides made against Covid-19 was the result of global solidarity.

"These epidemics are not over and we are all still reeling from Omicron. We were hoping for a quiet festive season, but we have a long way to go. We built international ties in the fight against HIV and through continued international solidarity and collaborations, we have a way forward against Covid-19 and future pandemics."

She was the associate scientific director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA (Caprisa) where she worked with her husband, infectious diseases epidemiologist Pro-



HIV-Aids activist Nkosi Johnson. | JUDA NGWENYA REUTERS

fessor Salim Abdool Karim, Caprisa's director.

He was the chair of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee before stepping down in March to focus on his work with HIV and Aids.

Abdool Karim said: "Covid-19 presented key challenges to controlling HIV and Aids. All focus was redirected to Covid-19 so HIV attention declined. The lockdowns caused a 57% drop in people visiting healthcare facilities that hindered HIV testing and antiretroviral therapy."

Abdool Karim said new variants had a higher likelihood to develop in immuno-compromised individuals.

"The Beta variant of concern that drove the country's second wave last festive season was developed in an HIV-positive patient. More variants will continue to rise from immuno-compromised individuals, which included transplant and chemotherapy patients," he said.

Abdool Karim added lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic that showed that flexibility was highly required in conjunction with committed leadership and innovation.

"The goal remains for HIV to become endemic by ending Aids by 2030. There are no silver bullets, there needs to be a recommitment to Treatment as Prevention and Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) must become the norm. PrEP prevents the spread of the virus," Abdool Karim said.