

PANDEMIC

Don't let noise about virus origins hinder action

EXPERTS on the Covid-19 virus have called on humanity to confront the pandemic head-on and not be distracted by side issues.

One of the South Africa's leading voices on the pandemic, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, says understanding the genesis of the virus matters. But it's more important to urgently find solutions to tackle the virus head-on "because there's more coming".

In the past week, there has been several positive steps. But Karim's stark warning comes amid fierce ongoing debate in mainly Western capitals over the origins of Covid-19, a discussion which takes centre stage ahead of solutions, inevitably dividing opinion.

Even after stepping down as the chairperson of the ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19 in March, the KwaZulu-Natal epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist remains in demand by the media for his insightful views on the pandemic.

The reality, he says, is that close to 5 million people around the world have died because of Covid-19, underscoring the need for solutions to tackle the scourge, not just attempting to find a cure. Globally, the virus has



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affected about 218 million people.

In South Africa 83343 people have died out of 2.79 million cases since March last year when the pandemic broke in the country. The statistics for Africa show more than 7 million cases with 180000 deaths.

Karim is a sober voice amid the noise. Last week the CIA presented an inconclusive report on the origins of the pandemic in Wuhan, China, to US President Joe Biden. The US has

remained a hotbed of hostility and misinformation, a case in point highlighted by the fact that while scientists have been searching for solutions, the Trump administration, before it's election defeat, labelled the pandemic a potential biological weapon.

Biden's administration seems to want to walk down the same road as Trump. But the report by the CIA commissioned by Biden found inconclusive evidence to support such a theory. If it seems like déjà vu, one may recall that in 1991, US president George Bush jr, joined by British prime minister Tony Blair, insisted on going to war against Iraq because of the existence of weapons of mass destruction. They found none.

Similar innuendo during the pandemic has done little to diminish the number of cases or deaths around the world. Since 2019, the US has reported 40 million cases and 642000 deaths. India 32 million and 439000 deaths. Brazil 21 million cases and 581000 deaths.

But Karim is optimistic. He refers to a journal article by scientist Shane Crotty on hybrid immunity with Covid-19 vaccines. According to the

article, hybrid vigour takes place when different plant lines are bred so the hybrid becomes a stronger plant. Something similar happens when natural immunity is combined with vaccine-generated immunity, resulting in 25 to 100 times higher antibody responses.

Karim believes the focus ought to be on how we can move forward. He says good work is being done by scientists leaving one confident that they're on top of their game.

He talks about seeing first-hand the devastation caused by the pandemic particularly in Italy before arriving in South Africa but then on November 9, everything changed when Pfizer, working with BioNTech, released their first results which showed that its vaccine candidate was found to be more than 90% effective in preventing Covid-19 in participants without evidence of prior Sars-CoV-2 infection.

He says the reason a vaccine arrived so swiftly is that the work on it began more about 18 years ago.

"When the original Sars outbreak occurred, a team started working on it. One in particular, a friend of ours called Barney Graham, did the

sequencing and built a vaccine for the original Sars but there was no use for the vaccine because it never came back. When the Sars-2 came along, he already had the vaccine from the original. He modified it for Covid-19 and his sequence is in the vaccines by Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson."

However, Karim warns that the next set of variants are now evolving. "This virus is not done with us."

However, Dr Thierno Balde, the deputy incident manager for the World Health Organization Africa based in Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo, says while Africa may not reach its target of vaccination for 10% of the most vulnerable on the continent, the consequences may be less important than elsewhere. Africa has a smaller fraction of deaths than in Europe, America and Asia.

However, given the low rate of vaccination in Africa, Balde says additional waves cannot be ruled out.

Since the need for grabbing the window of opportunity to ensure people are not distracted by any noise related to the origins of the virus, but are better prepared for what may come.