

COVID-19 Dawn of a new normal

“We can’t return to normal or all we’ll have achieved is a temporary stay of execution and it will unleash exactly the havoc that we are trying to avoid,” said virologist Professor Wolfgang Preiser.

By Nicky Belseck, medical journalist

H **HEAD OF THE** Division of Medical Virology, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science at the University of Stellenbosch and National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) Tyberg, Prof Preiser and specialist in Public Health Medicine, Dr Indira Govender spoke to Daily

Maverick Citizen editor Mark Heywood in a webinar last month.

“There are two things in favour of SA,” said Prof Preiser. “Firstly, government acted decisively, early in our own curve of the epidemic which is wonderful. In terms of where we were when it arrived here, action

was taken as early as possible and it was clear. The guidelines were clear and it’s wonderful to be under the kind of leadership we’ve seen. The other thing in our favour is that our epidemic curve is a few weeks behind other countries so we will be able to see what works and what doesn’t work,

and how we can minimise the economic problems that the shutdown causes while avoiding the worst of any medical repercussions.”

“Of course, control is still possible and in a sense that’s what we’re doing in SA, but all the measures we’re taking are to mitigate the situation rather than stop the disease. This new agent is very contagious, it’s very easily transmitted, and people may be infected before they show any symptoms, making it practically impossible to contain. In SA we’re trying to lessen the impact and flatten the curve so that hopefully the numbers of patients at any given moment in time will not exceed the capacity of the health system.”

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“In the future when patients want to see a doctor because a flu-like illness, the whole procedure will have to change,” said Prof Preiser. “We are at the point now where going forward we will have to treat respiratory infections, even if they are minor in the person that presents, much more seriously and make sure they are not passed on to other patients who are vulnerable.

“A vaccine may change the picture to some degree but I think for the foreseeable future, masks, and that doesn’t mean cloth masks that are nice that you would use to visit a supermarket – I’m talking about medical masks that will become part of the furniture in medical establishments.”

“And there will be these small fires, or clusters of outbreaks that Prof Salim Abdool Karim (world-renowned infectious diseases epidemiologist and chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Covid-19) has spoken about and we need to have rapid response to that. We need to have swift testing, we need isolation facilities, have contingency plans, and we need to be able to contain these clusters when they do crop up,” said Dr Govender. “Until we have a vaccine or a cure that is widely available, this is what we’ll be dealing with.” **MC**