

'TIME TO DROP THEM OUTDOORS'

Mask-wearing now a topic of fierce debate

SISONKE MLAMLA

EPIDEMIOLOGIST and infectious diseases specialist, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, says the country could do away with public health measures such as sanitising and outdoor mask-wearing.

Speaking at the weekend, the former government adviser urged the government to end almost all remaining lockdown restrictions, but also suggested that some lighter measures remain in place.

Karim said outdoor mask mandates and requirements to sanitise could be dropped. "We probably do need to retain some restrictions on large gatherings.

"We must ensure that all public indoor environments are largely restricted to individuals who are vaccinated.

"When you have had a vaccine, you carry a lower load of the virus when you get infected, meaning there is a lower risk of spreading Covid-19 to others," he said.

Advocacy group Action Society spokesperson Ian Cameron said it should be a choice for people. They should be able to choose whether they would like to wear a mask or not.

Cameron said if they were to do that, it should be respected, and if they weren't, that should also be respected.

"I think it is long overdue. SA needs



FORMER government advisor on Covid-19, Professor Salim Abdool Karim.

to move forward, and there is a lot of work that needs to start to be done in order for us to recover from the damage that many of the draconian regulations and restrictions have done to the economy of the country," he said.

The most vulnerable communities had been hurt the most, he said, and it's going to take a long time to recover. So that was one small step to make life easier for people who needed to put food on the table.

Dr Marvin Hsiao of the division of Medical Virology and Groote Schuur Complex of the National Health Laboratory Service, said from the scientific front, the benefit of masks in outdoor settings was much lower than poorly ventilated or crowded, indoor spaces.

"So I support the notion of drop-



SOUTH Africa could do away with public health measures such as sanitising and outdoor mask-wearing, says Professor Abdool Karim.

ping the outdoor mask mandate. However, this should come with greater understanding or reason why we had a mask mandate in the first place and what constitutes outdoors. So whether SA is ready, I don't know," Hsiao said.

He said the current management of Covid-19 cases was largely the same as in the second wave.

"The very small improvement is mainly due to better hospital capacity as most people have immunity through vaccinations or prior infections," he said.

Hsiao said there were some new antiviral drugs becoming approved for use but access in South Africa would remain limited for the next few months.

GOOD Party secretary-general Brett

Herron said medical experts should give guidance on what changes could be made to the regulations.

Odette Cason, from the office of Western Cape Premier Alan Winde, said Winde had on numerous occasions called on the president to remove the National State of Disaster declaration.

Cason said that on February 11, Winde wrote to President Cyril Ramaphosa requesting a meeting to discuss a roadmap to end the National State of Disaster, following his State of the Nation Address commitment.

She said in response, the Presidency asked that the premier instead engage with the Minister of Co-operative Governance, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, who, in turn, proposed that the issue

should rather be discussed at the President's Co-ordinating Council (PCC).

"No clear date or time was provided as to when this would take place," she said.

Cason said given the impending deadline, the premier had asked that the president urgently convene the recommended PCC to discuss the steps that need to be taken to end the National State of Disaster and allow the regulations to expire in their entirety.

Dlamini Zuma has been extending the declaration every month since June 15, 2020. Last month, Ramaphosa promised that the state of disaster would end soon.

The National State of Disaster was extended last month and is set to expire on March 15.