

Flipside of Covid gloom emerges

By **TANYA FARBER**

● Twelve tough months of Covid have left a legacy of innovations and changes to health systems and public behaviour that will deliver life-saving benefits for years.

Professor Ian Sanne – head of Right to Care and a member of the ministerial advisory committee (MAC) on Covid-19 – said a response co-ordinated at national level but rolled out provincially had taught important lessons.

“Provincial decision-making on things like data systems” had slowed the response in the first wave, but data approaches were now better organised and created the right environment for vaccine rollout and other interventions.

“This will allow SA to go to scale with integration of both public and private sectors and, more importantly, across all nine provinces,” Sanne told the Sunday Times.

This more centralised approach was a lesson for dealing with other cross-border and interprovincial issues such as HIV, TB and “even gender-based violence”, Sanne said.

Also, national co-ordination of scarce resources such as oxygen showed the benefit of “peripheral hospitals being able to treat more severe situations while awaiting transfers”. As a result, smaller hospitals would be able to scale up their high-care capacity in general, delivering far-reaching benefits for future emergencies and reducing, for example, maternal and child mortality.

There had also been an acceleration of training in emergency medical services and “remarkable” health system interventions, such as the local production of masks and the national ventilator project.

Making practices such as social distancing and mask wearing acceptable would reap benefits down the line, and “we have seen an amazing impact on influenza as a secondary effect, with almost no outbreak in the last year”, partly thanks to travel restrictions, Sanne said.

The head of the MAC, professor Salim Abdool Karim, said the pandemic had galvanised the science community, which had made an “amazing” contribution to research on the disease.

“No other country has had as many briefing sessions for the public,” Karim said, and Covid-19 had propelled innovation like that at Defy, “a name that makes us think of stoves and fridges, making ventilators during a crisis”.

Professor Marc Mendelson, head of infectious diseases at Groote Schuur Hospital, said the epidemic had “shown us just how quickly diagnostics can be developed”.

Speaking during a webinar hosted by the nonprofit Global Antibiotic Research & Development Partnership, Mendelson said the virus had also shown the enormous benefits of specialists across disciplines working together.

“At Groote Schuur, at the height of the pandemic, we had over 500 doctors from all the different specialisations working on Covid-19 admission wards.”

This was in sharp contrast to the fight against antibiotic resistance, a battle in which “so few were invested or working together”.

Another step forward is in vaccine technology for other diseases, and the first candidate vaccine that could immunise fully against malaria builds on mRNA technology developed because of the pandemic.

While traditional vaccines use an inactivated disease agent, mRNA vaccines introduce new RNA “instructions” that cells use to produce proteins. The cells are then able to produce the proteins on their own and an immune response is developed.