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## Top scientist warns doctors still prescribing ineffective Covid-19 treatments

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Doctors are continuing to prescribe ineffective Covid-19 treatments such as ivermectin despite the mounting evidence that they do not work, top scientist Salim Abdool Karim has warned in an editorial published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on Wednesday.

Karim is an internationally recognised epidemiologist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal who previously led a team of scientists advising the government on Covid-19. His editorial accompanied a US study, called Covid-OUT, that found three repurposed generic drugs – the anti-parasitic ivermectin, the antidepressant fluvoxamine and the diabetes treatment metformin – did not prevent high-risk patients with confirmed Covid-19 from developing severe illness.

The study adds to a growing body of evidence indicating these drugs are not appropriate for Covid-19 patients, said Karim.

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“Prescribing non-efficacious treatments is not a neutral or harmless option,” he said. Doing so denied patients appropriate treatments and exposed them to unnecessary side effects, and raised the risk of shortages for patients who needed them for other conditions, he said.

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The randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled Covid-OUT trial included more than 1,320 patients over the age of 30 who were overweight or obese. The researchers found none of the three drugs prevented hypoxaemia (dangerously low oxygen levels), a visit to the emergency room, hospitalisation or death from Covid-19.

While it may have been appropriate for doctors to experiment at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, before evidence for safe and effective treatments had emerged, there was no longer any justification to eschew medicines that worked in favour of those that did not, Karim said in a subsequent interview with Business Day.

“I have to say I am at a loss. I cannot understand why a doctor would deliberately not follow the evidence and use a treatment that has been shown to be [ineffective],” he said.

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The World Health Organization recommends doctors prescribe drugs such as corticosteroids and Paxlovid for Covid-19 patients, and explicitly advises against the use of ivermectin and fluvoxamine, as well as other repurposed drugs including the malaria treatment chloroquine and the gout remedy colchicine. SA's medicines regulator, the SA Health Products Regulatory Authority, has also warned against using ivermectin for Covid-19.

Yet ivermectin is still being prescribed in SA, said Karim, citing a statement submitted to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration by a doctor supporting an employee who objected to Covid-19 vaccination. The doctor had apparently treated more than 3,000 Covid-19 patients by administering ivermectin, fluvoxamine, chloroquine and vitamin D, none of which had been shown to be effective, said Karim.

“Our self-regulatory mechanisms are not able to adequately deal with this. I think the professional bodies need to do more,” he said.

There is no publicly available data on ivermectin use in the state sector, and the limited private sector data underrepresents the extent

of its use.

SA's biggest medical scheme administrator, Discovery Health, said less than 1% of the members of its largest client Discovery Health Medical Scheme with confirmed Covid-19 had claimed for ivermectin. It had received 2,656 claims for ivermectin from members with documented Covid-19 infection since 2020, representing 42.8% of all ivermectin claims during this period.

Discovery Health CEO Ryan Noach emphasised that while Covid-19 is a prescribed minimum benefit and medical schemes must therefore cover treatment costs from their risk pool, this did not include ivermectin.

“The basket of care is designed to cover all evidence-based treatment options, and considering that the evidence fails to show any benefit of ivermectin for Covid-19 treatment or prevention, it is explicitly excluded from the risk funding,” he said.

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