

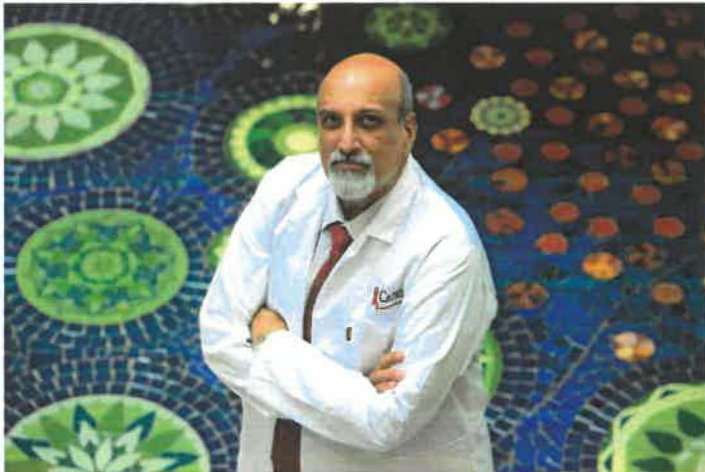
SOUTH AFRICA

Covid-19 no longer coming in waves but small outbreaks and spikes, says Prof Salim Abdool Karim

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Suthentira Govender
Senior reporter



Prof Salim Abdool Karim, former head of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee.
File photo.

Image: JACKIE CLAUSEN

The nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has changed, no longer coming in waves but in small spikes and outbreaks.

That's the word from renowned epidemiologist and former head of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee Prof Salim Abdool Karim.

Abdool Karim spoke about the status of the pandemic to TimesLIVE on Friday after the release of a new global study which makes recommendations on how to end the public health threat without worsening socioeconomic burdens.

The study, published in the journal *Nature* this week, says specific efforts and resources are still required to save lives.

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- Prof Salim Abdool Karim

This is one of six main themes for action identified by a panel of experts, including Abdool Karim, from different disciplines and more than 100 countries to develop global consensus on how to address these issues.

Looking at the South African situation, Abdool Karim said there has been an increase in Covid cases in recent weeks. “But the pandemic is not behaving in the usual waves any more. It’s behaving differently, going through small outbreaks and continually spreading at a low level. Every now and then you get a little spike and then it comes down.

“In the past, where we saw these waves from a completely new variant, that we are not seeing now. Each wave is driven by a variant. But we don’t have a new variant as yet, we still have Omicron.

“The new variant is going to be called Pi, the next letter in the Greek alphabet, which is not yet with us.

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“We are not seeing [a] significant increase in hospitalisation. It reflects a combination of vaccines and past infections which is keeping people out of hospital; said Abdool Karim.

The latest Covid-19 wastewater data from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) showed “all samples across South Africa have mutations characteristic of the Omicron sub-lineages of BA.4 and BA.5, circulating in Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and City of Tshwane, eThekweni, Eastern Cape and the Free State with evidence of XAY/XBA (lineages first detected in South Africa) circulating in all provinces”.

Abdool Karim said six areas were identified in the study to help end the threat posed by Covid-19.

“The first is we must recognise we are still living in the midst of a pandemic and SARS-COV-2 is probably going to be with us for a long time.

“We live under a long-term threat from this virus. The difference is we are not in an emergency mode anymore. We are in that chronic phase. There are several new variants being generated but not a single, dominant variant like we had previously.

“The second is that in the midst of all the misinformation, vaccines remain our primary tool against this pandemic.

“In South Africa we have a long way to go because only about 50% of adults are vaccinated. We can’t lift the foot off the pedal in terms of vaccines; we need to ensure we continue making better vaccines. That people take the vaccines, get at least three doses and get booster shots as and when recommended.”

He said the study also identified Covid-19 can’t be solved only by the health department and scientists. “You need a whole of government approach, which has also been implemented in South Africa.

“Fourth, you have to have a health system ready to respond. South Africa’s healthcare system is in such deep trouble, largely because of poor management.”

Abdool Karim said the study also found disinformation about the virus poses a “deep threat to society, science and truth through unregulated media such as social media”.

“This disinformation has become quite rabid in our society and people have lost touch what the scientific evidence and truth is.”

The sixth key area identified in the study is mutual interdependence, “meaning what I do affects the next person. That’s a fundamental component of the response. People don’t understand the fundamental reality of Covid is that no-one is safe until everyone is safe.”

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