

Covid-19 – a fifth wave in the pipeline?

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THE real impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the South African population, as well as forecasts of what possibly lies ahead, were the focus of an informative University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) webinar.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research and Innovation at UKZN, Professor Mosa Moshabela facilitated the robust discussion which delved into the importance of vaccinations, understanding the risk of transmission and the different waves of the pandemic, strengthening herd immunity and finally, learning to co-exist with the virus.

Dr Richard Lessells, an infectious diseases specialist at the KwaZulu-Natal Research and Innovation Sequencing Platform (KRISP) at UKZN and an honorary research associate at the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), said: "We've seen the waves being driven by the different variants, and at this stage it is impossible to predict what the next variant will be, but we can expect a fifth wave."

Lessells went on to describe the importance of being fully vaccinated in order to avoid getting seriously ill if infected with the virus. "Unfortunately, the majority of people in South Africa over the age of 50 – the group most at high risk of hospitalisation and even death – have not received their first dose of the vaccine. As one moves to the lower age groups, the uptake is much less. Thus far, fewer than a million of the population have had the booster vaccine."

He added that although the fourth wave may be over in South Africa with transmission levels relatively low, it is not the time to relax and stop following



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basic protocols such as sanitising, wearing a face mask in closed spaces and practising social distancing. "The virus is still with us, but in a different phase. We need to think about the long-term public health response, but currently the protection of people highest at risk is where the focus should be. Adherence has been good, but going back to the basics is key to safe guard environments favourably predisposed for high transmission rates."

Clinical virologist and head of depart-

ment in the UKZN Discipline of Virology and KZN National Health Laboratory Service, Dr Nokukhanya Msomi explained that antibodies reduce the risk of infection, while T-cells play an important role in controlling disease. "We need to have all levels of immunity," said Msomi. "Antibodies do wane over time, so one layer of defence is not enough. Vaccinations followed by recommended booster doses enhance protection. The vaccine also minimises the chances of getting Long Covid."

She said that at present, the public health benefit of vaccinating youngsters aged between five and 11 was marginal.

Msomi added that it was still essential to test people who were symptomatic, as well as those who were in a congregate setting following an outbreak: "The virus is not going away. We must strengthen our protection."

The speakers predicted a fifth Covid-19 wave in April or May, possibly with a new variant, but felt that it could be a smaller resurgence.