



COVID-19: IT'S TIME TO REPLACE FEAR WITH FACTS

For five-and-counting months, South Africans anxiously watched the number of Covid-19 cases steadily climb. As the cases surged, so did our fear.

After the first confirmed Covid-19 case in early March, we became accustomed to dismal news headlines like: 'South Africa coronavirus cases surge past 500,000', 'Deaths in South Africa now exceed 8000', and 'South Africa Covid-19 deaths "to soar" in coming months'.

The constant flow of bad news, and the restrictions imposed as a result, may seem warranted, but many people have also questioned the science that lead us down a path of economic destruction and restrictions on our human rights.

Nick Hudson, an actuary and co-founder of Pandemics Data and Analytics, better known as PANDA, is such a person. Out of concerns about the long-term effects of Covid-19 restrictions, PANDA was launched in March 2020 to provide decision-makers with cal-

culated data on the virus's cost on South African livelihoods.

And it is not good news. That is according to Hudson and his team of volunteers who consist of actuaries, lawyers, medical doctors, economists, data scientists, statisticians and media specialists.

'To make matters worse, they did not revise their models according to the experience of other countries like Sweden which had no lockdown and whose number of deaths quickly declined. Error correction was not happening, and the result was a massive overcall,' says Hudson.

Most news reports misrepresent the bigger picture

According to Hudson, the tendency of the media to exaggerate did not help either. 'Most media coverage on Covid-19 contains serious misrepresentation, selective facts or no attempt to moderate the facts with perspective.'

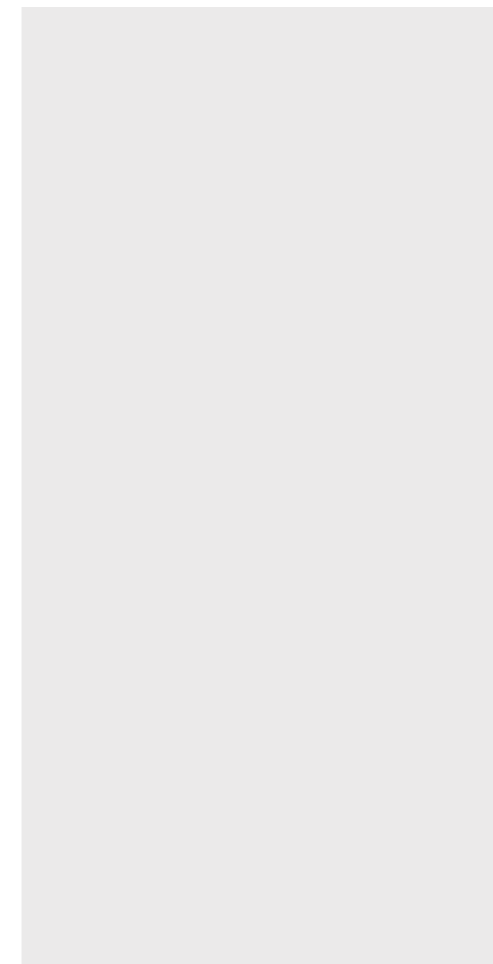
'For example, look at the widely publicised claim that South Africa is the fifth hardest hit country in the world. This claim didn't take into consideration that a lot of testing has been done in South Africa thus far, that we are a relatively big country, or that the number of cases does not distinguish between the asymptomatic or mildly ill and people who suffer severe clinical illness. The more relevant statistic is deaths per million of population. If you look at that, we rank about 35th in the world.'

We also keep hearing about a looming second wave. 'What the media doesn't tell you is these second waves happen in parts of affected countries where the numbers haven't peaked yet. For example, in America, the numbers will peak in one state, and then peak in another state. It looks like a second wave, but it's just the first time that the numbers are peaking in different areas.'

'Recently, the media also tended to focus on the possible long-term

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effects of the virus, but it is a fact that any virus can cause long-term effects, even the common cold or the flu. Also, it seems as if many of these reports may be picking up pre-existing conditions that have nothing to do with the Covid disease process.'

What should South Africa have done differently?

No lockdown

'By now it is old news that lockdowns have no effect on the number of Covid-19 deaths,' says Hudson. 'This became very clear in late March, and there are enough statistics to prove that there is no difference to the number of deaths per million people in countries with or without lockdown.'

'Evidence is also now emerging to support PANDA's original conjecture that 30 times more loss of life would result from the repercussions of the lockdown, including from suicides, malnourishment and avoiding urgent medical care, than from Covid-19.'

Informing accurate facts

'The government should have let people know who was at risk, and let the rest of the population get on with their lives, in order to establish herd immunity that would eventually also protect the more vulnerable people in our communities.'

Depopulate high-risk areas

'Nursing homes and hospitals should have been depopulated. People in nursing homes who tested positive for Covid-19 should have been sent to homes of young families to bring down the viral load in these hotspots and reduce the exposure of the elderly to other infections. Hospitals are bad places for old people to be. However, due to irrational fear, this wasn't happening. Staff should also have been rotated more frequently and ventilation improved.'

Draw advice from various fields

'The government mainly took advice from epidemiologists. These specialists have a narrow world view, they're employed by government, and they are cushioned from the consequences of lockdown, which they had no problem enforcing on all citizens, including the poorest of the poor.'

'A good example is the ban on alcohol, which was supported by the South African Medical Research Council, to win a couple of hundred beds. No consideration was given to the hundreds of thousands of jobs that will be lost and the millions of people affected by this. It was just not thought through, because they are not people inclined to stepping back and considering the consequences of the massive economic impact and loss of jobs and livelihoods.'

'The government should have drawn experts from various fields, including business people, actuaries, economists and doctors, to give a more balanced view that would not only take into consideration the consequences on our healthcare system, but also on the economy.'

'South Africa is in dangerous territory at the moment,' says Hudson. 'All South African citizens need to step up and speak out. It's time that we call out scare tactics, bad science and bad policy.'