

South Africa Covid-19 & vaccines Social Listening Report

30 January 2022, Report 80

This is a weekly report of the RCCE Social Listening and Infodemic Management team on COVID-19 vaccine and other health emergencies concerns, sentiments, rumours, and misinformation in South Africa. It provides an analysis of online and offline content. Thanks to all who contribute to this report each week.

ONLINE KEY TRENDS | COVID-19

Conversations that generated more traction. An urgent Pretoria high court application to halt the COVID-19 vaccination drive ([Here](#)) have generated more traction on social media. ([Here](#)), ([Here](#)) and ([Here](#)), including Ted Cruz's bill to reinstate military members who were fired for refusing to get vaccinated ([Here](#)), and China's ability to handle the spread of the virus. ([Here](#))

Renewed calls to halt vaccination. Fear of vaccine adverse events continue to be misinterpreted or overstated. A video clip posted on YouTube and Online newspaper articles about the mounting calls to halt of COVID-19 vaccination, received mixed reactions. The experts interviewed by the media described themselves at pro-safety activities. They were concerned by the alleged increasing vaccine-related serious adverse events and demanded an urgent independent investigation. ([Here](#)) and ([Here](#))

The reaction on social media was negative with some people describing the vaccination campaign as a "scam", "genocide" and "manslaughter". ([Here](#)) "As a medical doctor, I can confirm that we are seeing a lot of strange illnesses in people after taking the jab", and that "health regulators and authorities who ignore the alarming danger signals that are now becoming evident should be held accountable for manslaughter." ([Here](#))

A social media poster urging educators to ensure they are fully vaccinated and boosted, was also criticized. ([Here](#)) They questioned the safety of the vaccines calling them "poison" and claimed "COVID increases with each jab" ([Here](#)), "I resisted the pressure" ([Here](#)) and "tried to warn people but they wouldn't listen. I was mocked and ridiculed". ([Here](#))

Growing anxiety about 5 - 11-year-olds vaccination. Social media users have expressed concern about the likely vaccination of children and demanded an urgent investigation of the vaccine-related adverse events. ([Here](#)) This group will be offered vaccination with doses of the paediatric Comimaty (Pfizer) early next year, with an interval of 21 days between the two doses. ([Here](#)) Younger children tend to become sicker and develop severe respiratory illness when they get COVID-19, according to a study. ([Here](#))

Ongoing engagement on COVID-19 masks. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recommended the use of mask by public in specific situations such as when following recent exposure to Covid-19, when someone has or suspects they have Covid-19, when someone is at high risk of severe Covid-19, and for anyone in a crowded, enclosed or poorly ventilated space. ([Here](#))

Most people on social media supported the wearing of masks in specific situation and others preferred masks to vaccines. Others said people should normalize wearing of mask, sanitizing and social distance, as "that's the life we live now", ([Here](#)) and encouraged others to do the same. "Just wear masks, avoid crowds and sanitize extra, no vaccines." ([Here](#)) "I won't go for jabs." ([Here](#))

OFFLINE KEY TRENDS | COVID-19

High interest in COVID-19 booster doses. Following the announcement of additional boosters made available at all active available from 30 January 2023, there were requests on National Health Hotline for booster shot information and people calling to find out when and where they can get the boosters, the list of vaccination sites, and seeking clarity around which booster doses will be administered.

More enquiries about vaccination sites. There were few enquiries around which sites will be administering these booster doses and if all sites were stocked. More people also expressed concerns that they would need to take a day's leave to visit the clinic, and questions from 50+ age group as well as immunocompromised looking for more information and when to visit the clinic for the booster.

Most frequent questions included; *"Can I get my Covid-19 test results?", "I have vaccinated and my arm is sore and swollen", "Where can I get J&J vaccine", "I received J&J vaccine now EVDS cannot allow me to get Pfizer vaccine", "You uploaded my information on SAPHRA but no one has called me", "I'm waiting for my TB results", "I got a dog bite and want to report rabies", and "Where are vaccine sites for measles?"*

General vaccine queries. There were queries about vaccine side effects, requests for vaccination record updates, information edits to their profile and medical records. One person was unable to register as the ID number had already been registered against a different name. Others required assistance to download vaccination certificates for travel and specific requests for certificates relating to a specific church group.

Complaints about health services. A citizen called in looking to lodge a complaint around bad service at a hospital, and another person calling to lodge a complaint around poor ambulance services. There were **concerns** raised a child who fell ill after Mozambique visit and wanted to know how to check for COVID-19.

Non-health related queries. They include questions around registering, approval, status updates, date of expected payout for the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant, queries relating to the Department of Labour, assistance with faulty electricity meter, registration dates for university, housing application for Defense force, and assistance with joining Scorpion Law Department.

Anti-vaxxers campaign. On WhatsApp groups, the experts who demand an immediate halt of the vaccination campaign, were dismissed as anti-vaxxers. Others were concerned *"they seem to have good media contacts" to spread misinformation, and "have the financial and legal muscles to hold the government at ransom", "deeply problematic nonsense in those papers, they were also given airtime on tv", "they are known for fictional stories masquerading as news", and more concerning was that "their anti-vaccine campaign may spread childhood immunization campaigns such as measles, polio, diphtheria, etc."*

ONLINE KEY TRENDS | MEASLES

Steady measles spread. A total of 406 measles cases have been detected as of 26 January 2023, most measles cases being among the 5-9-year age group in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Free State and North West. [\(Here\)](#) and [\(Here\)](#) The sentiments on social media included *"I thought at school you had to show your immunization card to prove you have had the injections", "Is that not a requirement for entrance?"* [\(Here\)](#) and *"children need to be vaccinated, most of us had the vacations as kids"* [\(Here\)](#)

There were also request for information about the following: "I need to vaccinate again if I did when I was a kid?" [\(Here\)](#) *"Must a fully immunized child get an additional dose?", "Does an adult who is a contact of the infected child also need to vaccinate?", "Do creches and primary schools offer vaccination for measles because my children got vaccinated today?"* [\(Here\)](#) *"What will happen to my 5 year old child who got vaccinated twice at the clinic and now at school" I stated in his form that he got vaccinated but they vaccinated her anyway".* [\(Here\)](#) *"Where do we vaccinate our kids, our clinic says the vaccine is finished".* [\(Here\)](#)

MISINFORMATION

MISINFO: ~~There is no need to vaccinate the child again if they were fully vaccinated against the measles virus [here](#)~~ **TRUTH:** Yes, the child will receive an additional measles dose during the national measles catchup campaign and contacts will also be vaccinated.

MISINFO: ~~Covid vaccines cause heart attacks and inflammation of the heart.~~ **TRUTH:** While there are some cases of inflammation of the heart (myocarditis, the risk is very low, see [here](#)) There is no evidence to support claims that covid vaccines directly cause heart attacks. See [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~COVID vaccinations make you more susceptible to serious illness and death and most COVID deaths now are triple vaccinated people.~~ **TRUTH:** No evidence to support these claims. More people did lose their lives during COVID – due to COVID not the vaccine see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~People who have been vaccinated are more likely to get seriously ill from COVID.~~ **TRUTH:** No evidence to support this claim. People who have been vaccinated far less likely to experience severe symptoms. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines are harmful to people who are immunocompromised.~~ **TRUTH** COVID-19 vaccine is made available to provide ongoing protection, especially for older persons and those who are immunocompromised who are at the highest risk of severe COVID complications. ([Here](#))

WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA) & Viral Facts

AIRA is the Africa-wide initiative of the World Health Organisation, managing the infodemic of misinformation and communications overload related to Covid and vaccination. They produce Viral Facts content responding to misinformation which can be used freely. You can find previous reports on the [AIRA page](#).

KEY TREND: MEASLES

Concerns about vaccine efficacy. The number of measles cases in South Africa continues to rise, with 406 laboratory-confirmed cases reported on 26 January 2023. ([Here](#)) The comments from South African social media users are centered around vaccines efficacy. The distrust in measles vaccinations for children is concerning as it is considered by the WHO as a key public health strategy to reduce global measles deaths. The belief that the measles vaccine causes severe immune system side effects has also been spotted in monitored comments.

Why is it concerning?

- Misinformation and information gaps related to measles vaccine efficacy have been circulating for few months despite the communication efforts put into place. This show that there is a need to revise the current communication strategies or increase efforts to address the issue.
- Measles vaccination is part of the routine childhood immunization program in South Africa. The risk of unchecked misinformation and unfilled information gaps might develop vaccine hesitancy, and then have a potential negative impact on children's and adults' health.

What can we do?

- Create opportunities for parents to share their concerns and questions regarding the vaccine with healthcare professionals, community workers, teachers to increase trust and uptake. Communication resources such as the WHO Measles [Fact Sheet](#). Sheet can be referred to develop communication messages.
- Ensure active monitoring of misinformation and rumors to allow for rapid response to take place, including localized information on how to access routine immunization, vaccine schedules, common side effects, and effectiveness.

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Childhood immunization. To ensure that all children are up to date with measles vaccinations, the RCCE TWG must continue to encourage parents and caregivers to use the Children's Click [Road to Health](#) schedule. The RCCE will continue to monitor misinformation and rumors to allow for rapid response to take place.

COVID-19 is over. As the RCCE reiterates, the pandemic is not over yet, and vigilance and adherence to public health measures are vital to stem the spread. The RCCE continues to highlight the vaccine's ability to mitigate severe symptoms and complications from contracting the disease and how it can protect individuals from new strains of COVID.

Vaccine side effects/ long-term effects Side effects continue to be misinterpreted or overstated. The RCCE continue to reinforce messages on COVID-19 side effects with updated material that is relevant to a specific concern, and to provide verified accurate information regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and booster doses.

METHODOLOGY AND COLLABORATION

The Social Listening & Infodemiology team that produces this report is part of the Risk Communications & Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group of the Department of Health in South Africa. This report is compiled following the methodology of the WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA, see [here](#), the "Identify" stage. We pool information from the following:

- **SA National Department of Health**
- **National Health Hotline:** Reports from the national callcentre
- **Prækelt.Org:** NDOH Covid-19 WhatsApp system
- **WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)**
- **UNICEF:** digital analysis of content on Google, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and digital news
- **SA Red Cross:** Network of over 2,000 community volunteers reporting misinformation and concerns.
- **Real 411 Media Monitoring Africa:** a mis- and disinformation reporting and debunking initiative
- **COVID Comms:** a network of communications specialists that produces information on the pandemic.
- **DOH Free State & KZN:** Provincial Departments of Health
- **Health Systems Trust, Community Constituency Front (CCF), HealthEnabled**
- **Centre for Communication Impact, Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change, Section 27**
- **Medical Research Council, National Institute for Communicable Diseases,**
- **SA Vaccination and Immunisation Centre, HSRC, DG Murray Trust, Right to Care**
- **Universities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Free State, Wits, Stellenbosch, Sefako Makgatho**

National Health Hotline: 0800 029 999
WhatsApp: 0600-123456
HealthHotline@health.gov.za
Twitter Instagram YouTube
https://medsafety.sahpra.org.za/
AEFI@health.gov.za
https://findmyjab.co.za/
https://www.real411.org/Report Misinfo
WHO/AIRA ViralFacts

Other organisations involved Government Communications & Information Service, SA Council of Churches, Clinton Health Access Initiative, Heartlines, Children's Radio Foundation, IPSOS, People's Health Movement, and Business for SA, SA Minerals Council, Wits Reproductive Health & HIV Institute, UN Verified, Deaf SA, SA National Council for the Blind, Treatment Action Campaign and Disability SA.

The drafting team this week includes Charity Bhengu and Nombulelo Leburu (NDOH). The data for this report was collected by the National Department of Health (NDOH), Health Systems Trust (HST), and the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD), University of Free State and Real 411.

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