

South Africa Social Listening and Infodemic Management Report 22 August 2023, Report #89

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This is the weekly RCCE Social Listening and Infodemic Management trends report on COVID-19 vaccine and other health emergencies tracking and responding to public concerns, sentiments, rumours, and misinformation in South Africa. It provides key trends and analysis of online and offline content. Thanks to all contributors to this weekly report.

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### KEY TRENDS | COVID-19

**New COVID-19 strain.** This week saw a high volume of COVID-19 related calls and enquiries following the publicity of the new COVID Strain, EG.5 SARS-COV-2 Subvariant and the announcement of the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination of the 5–11-year-olds with immune-compromised conditions. This includes the following enquiries:

- *Can you confirm what was reported today on current news about a new COVID variant which is easily transmissible to those who have not vaccinated for COVID-19.*
- *Is it true that a new variant has been detected in the country and do we need to worry?*
- *In so as the latest variant of the EG.5, where do we stand as a country? I haven't seen much surveillance data thus far.*
- *I see reports of EG.5 that have been recorded in SA, is this true and is this a cause for concern?*
- *So, quiet on all the info coming out worldwide about the negative effects & even deaths related to the COVID-19 vaccine?*
- *Have our politicians all kept up to date with their vaccines, all triple boosted? Better get them their 4<sup>th</sup>*
- *Please I lost my contact number and I need to download vaccine certificate; can you help me to update this contact please?*

- *Where can we find the latest figures for active cases of COVID-19, please? Also, who is tracking sequelae and developing diagnostic processes to determine SASSA grant eligibility for post viral chronic illness as disability?*

**COVID-19 treatment.** There are trends and sentiments associated with the FDA approval of the Veklury (Remdesivir) for COVID-19 treatment in patients with severe Renal Impairment, including those on dialysis. The online conversations about this being the first approved antiviral treatment that can be used across all stages of renal diseases, provides insights into the public's attitudes and opinions, based on their publicly available online interactions. ([Here](#))

The following are some of the expert views:

- *“People with kidney disease and other severe chronic medical conditions are at higher risk for more severe illness” ([Here](#))*
- *“People on dialysis can have weaker immune system, making it harder to fight infections” ([Here](#))*
- *Older adults and people with kidney disease or other severe chronic medical conditions are at higher risk for more serious COVID-19 illness” ([Here](#))*

The misleading sentiments on social media are:

- *“I hear Veklury has been authorized on 12th July by FDA for covid on patients with renal failure. It is another name for Remdesivir and people are not aware”*
- *“Hospitals are calling remdesivir by its brand name VEKLURY now because so many ppl are refusing “remdesivir” Don't fall for the bait & switch!”*
- *“They're calling it VEKLURY now because so many people know to refuse Remdesivir. Be aware! VEKLURY is the brand name for REMDESIVIR!! Do not take it!”*
- *“FDA just approved Remdeathivir now called Veklury. The FDA is an organized crime syndicate.”*

Looking into the comparison in the way people search for information related to Veklury, Kidney disease and COVID-19 vaccines, and the variations in information seeking behaviours about related Veklury, Kidney disease and COVID-19 vaccines, there is high interest in anything related to COVID-19. The type of information people seek in relation to COVID-19 vaccines includes *“what causes kidney diseases”* and *“symptoms of kidney diseases”*, also reveals the knowledge gaps surrounding kidney diseases.

The social listening process and analysis of Google Trends data, focusing on the search trends for four distinct topics: Veklury (Remdesivir), kidney disease, Pfizer vaccine, and Janssen vaccine, highlights the levels of interest and awareness among the general population regarding these subjects. It reveals that kidney disease consistently exhibits the highest search volume among the four topics, indicating a significant public interest in this health issue.

This result of the analysis, according to the UFS Interdisciplinary Centre for Digital Futures (ICDF) also underscores the importance of kidney disease awareness and education campaigns and suggests that the general population seeks information on

prevention, treatment, and management of kidney disease. Interestingly, the Pfizer vaccine emerges as the second most searched topic, surpassing both the Janssen vaccine and Veklury (Remdesivir).

It also suggests that COVID-19 vaccination remains a prominent concern and that Pfizer's vaccine, known for its early authorization and widespread distribution, continues to capture public attention. The Janssen vaccine follows closely behind, indicating a substantial level of interest in COVID-19 vaccination options. Surprisingly, Veklury (Remdesivir) records the lowest search volume among the topics. This could be attributed to multiple factors, such as its specificity as a treatment for COVID-19, limited availability, or the relative decline in public interest as the pandemic evolves.

Regional variations in search interest are also observed, suggesting that geographic factors play a role in determining the popularity of these topics. For instance, certain regions might exhibit higher interest in kidney disease due to prevalent risk factors, or varying vaccine distribution strategies might impact the popularity of Pfizer and Janssen vaccines in different areas.

**COVID-19 vaccination.** There is heightened interest in the rollout of the vaccination of children aged 5-11 years at risk of severe COVID-19 diseases. There is positive media coverage with few negative comments from anti-vaxxers. There is also fear and concern about the safety of the vaccines. ([Here](#))

There have also been a lot of questions about the availability of the vaccines. Most people do not know where to find information about the latest list of facilities offering vaccines for children, and others are concerned that the Gauteng province has not confirmed their list of facilities with vaccines for children.

Some parents are adamant about vaccinating their children, while others worry about the potential vaccine side effects. *Those who are in favour of childhood COVID-19 vaccination believe it increases defense against COVID-19 infection. [Here](#) "Just checking when the Pfizer COVID vaccination will be available in Johannesburg as I want to give it to my son who recently turned 12."* ([Here](#))

*Some parents are hesitant to accept the COVID-19 vaccine for their children because they believe that there is no need to vaccinate children [Here](#) because there "is low risk of COVID-19 in children compared to adults and a lack of clarity on the relative effects of the disease and vaccine". [Here](#) Others mistrust government and experts because they believe they "do not know its long-term side effects" of the vaccines for children. And some saying, "the new variant is mild with flu-like symptoms, there is no need to vaccinate". [Here](#)*

The general feeling is that fear influence most the parents' decision on whether to vaccinate their children or not?" [Here](#) "They would feel more responsible if their children became sick after COVID-19 vaccination than if they became sick without vaccination". [Here](#)

**COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.** *An online article has highlighted the impact of COVID-19 misinformation on public health with the many examples of false information spread during periods of heightened fear, such as disease outbreaks, natural disasters, etc. due to pervasiveness of social media* [Here](#) It further discusses the detrimental impacts of misinformation on public health, with a special focus on infectious diseases, and reviews initiatives to ensure accurate health messaging in the age of social media. [Here](#) It reveals that at least 4 in 10 people had been misled by false claims related to COVID-19. [Here](#)

Another study confirms a potential spillover of vaccine hesitancy from COVID-19 to other routine vaccinations. “*COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy may be linked to other forms of vaccine hesitancy for common conditions like Human papillomavirus (HPV) and Hepatitis B (HBV) vaccine*”, confirming the associated likelihood of the link between COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and HBV, HPV uptake. [Here](#) Other experts believe that “*sharing data, explaining the science, and listening to people’s concerns can help address vaccine hesitancy*” [Here](#)

There are also conversations about a report that reveals a worrying number of patients with various persistent symptoms following mild or moderate COVID-19 mainly presenting as fatigue, exertion intolerance, headache, myalgia, neurological and cognitive deficits as well as orthostatic disturbances, which can severely impact the patients’ quality of life. [Here](#) It estimates “*a proportion of 2%–10% of all COVID-19 patients to be still impaired one year after infection.*” [Here](#)

## KEY TRENDS | COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

An analysis of the community feedback and RCCE initiatives related to disease outbreaks such as Cholera in vulnerable communities, reveals high awareness and concern about cholera and other diseases, demand for timely and accurate cholera-related information and positive feedback on effective SARCS initiatives which include the following:

- Effective RCCE through community radio, loud hailers, and gatherings.
- Cholera Outbreak Team of trained volunteers ensuring disease control.
- Successful community radio campaigns engaging a wide audience.
- Loud hailers disseminating key messages in remote areas.
- Community gatherings promoting interactive discussions.

## MISINFORMATION

**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 and are at the highest risk of severe COVID complications. (Here)

**MISINFO:** ~~The measles vaccine can kill you.~~ The vaccine is very safe and is effective at preventing measles. **TRUTH** There have not been any recorded deaths directly caused by the measles vaccine. Some of the common side effects of the vaccine would include fevers, mild rashes, and temporary pain in the joints. Very rarely, a person may have a serious allergic reaction to the vaccine. Nonetheless, being vaccinated is much safer than getting measles. (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](#).

#### **Content to consider:**

In South African news this week, articles featured widespread confusion and frustration with the vaccine registration process. This week's South Africa Social Listening Report also noted considerable confusion surrounding the vaccine registration process.

- Seniors struggle with registration [Here](#), [Here](#) and [Here](#)
- Claim that some people trying to cheat the vaccine registration system [Here](#) and [Here](#)
- Criticism around lack of coordination on vaccine enrollment and delivery [Here](#)
- Frustrated post on lack of priority for South Africans with co-morbidities [Here](#)
- Ongoing frustration with the slowness of the vaccine rollout here

### **PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The comparative analysis of Google Trends data provides valuable insights into the public's search behaviors and interests related to Veklury (Remdesivir), kidney disease, Pfizer vaccine, and Janssen vaccine, as well as proposes useful actions for RCCE.

- The findings emphasize the need for targeted awareness campaigns on kidney disease and reinforce the continued significance of COVID-19 vaccination efforts.
- Additionally, the study underscores the dynamic nature of public interest in health-related topics, warranting ongoing monitoring and research. Further research could explore reasons behind the decreased interest in Veklury and its implications for public health communication.

The proposed actions for RCCE in relation to Cholera also include the need to prioritize Cholera-specific communication beyond the outbreaks through the following.

- review feedback mechanism to enhance RCCE efforts in addressing the concerns of the public,
- continue disseminating timely and accurate information on prevention and treatment,
- continue promoting proper hygiene and safe water practices to protect vulnerable communities,
- strengthen engagement channels, and continue using community radio, loud hailers for gatherings.
- explore other innovative methods to reach a wider audience,
- organise cholera-specific refresher training to improve response to outbreaks, and

## 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

National Health Hotline: 0800  
029 999

[WhatsApp: 0600-123456](#)  
[Healthhotline@health.gov.za](mailto:Healthhotline@health.gov.za)

[Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#) | [YouTube](#)

<https://medsafety.sahpra.org.za/>

[AEFI@health.gov.za](mailto:AEFI@health.gov.za)

<https://findmyjab.co.za/>

<https://www.real411.org/Report>  
Misinfo

WHO/AIRA [ViralFacts](#)

- **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**

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 (NDOH). The data for this report was collected by the National Department of Health (NDOH), Health Systems Trust (HST), NICD, UFS Interdisciplinary Centre for Digital Futures (ICDF), KeReady, Right To Care, and SA Red Cross.*

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