

South Africa COVID-19 and Vaccine Social Listening Report 21 October 2021, Report 23

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This is a weekly report of COVID & vaccine sentiment, rumours & misinformation in SA. Further info [here](#).

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KEY TRENDS

- **Certificates / passports:** The launch of the vaccine passports by the Department of Health has caused huge interest, with over 1.5 million people downloading their document. Many others are having difficulties accessing their vaccine certificate code. This has caused many calls to the Hotline call centre to sort out issues, such as details incorrectly registered on EVDS.
- **Increased vaccine acceptance:** Multiple anecdotal evidence that there is a small shift in public sentiments from vaccine hesitancy towards more keenness for vaccination, in many parts of the country. However, many logistical barriers still limit people actually vaccinating – long waiting times at vaccination site, some sites not easily reachable and the affordability of transportation cost, e.g. in Eastern Cape switching resources to vaccinate in rural areas ([here](#)).
- **Huge impact of Covid:** Tragic news that Covid has led to nearly 250,00 excess deaths ([here](#)).
- **Youth** (18 – 34), however, remain the age group with the greatest vaccine hesitancy throughout the country. This age group is more likely to spread viral messages and myth on social media, especially about dangerous side-effects (fake news). One piece of research suggested that overall acceptance of vaccination amongst those aged between 18 and 25 had declined from 63% in June to 55% in October.
- **Artists' influence:** Some SA music artists have released songs that undermine confidence in vaccines, which increases fear and vaccine hesitancy.
- **Increasing concerns about the possibility of mandatory vaccination.** Narratives about incentivised, mandatory and coerced vaccination are generating opposition to

vaccination, and being used by anti-vaxxers and political parties to stir up emotion. There have been public protests ([here](#) and [here](#)). Many individuals who were not against vaccination per se, are angry and now refusing to vaccinate as they feel their freedom of choice is going to be restricted. People who have opposed any Covid vaccination are now taking advantage of legitimate debate around compulsory vaccination to increase levels of protest against the whole vaccine rollout, (e.g. an opinion poll of 60,000 is misleading and conflates legitimate concerns around whether vaccines should be mandatory with opposition to any vaccine, [here](#)).

- In particular, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) has opposition to ‘forced’ vaccination as a core part of their local election campaign ([here](#)). However, the SA Human Rights Commission says it is constitutionally permissible to require vaccination in specific circumstances ([here](#)). Several companies now have vaccine mandates, including Mediclinic and Life Healthcare ([here](#)) and many more are considering it ([here](#)). The Student Representative Councils (SRCs) at University of Cape town and Wits oppose university policy requiring vaccines in most cases ([here](#))
- **Pharmacies undermining rollout.** There is direct evidence of at least one private pharmacy which has registered as a vaccination site and received vaccine doses, then deliberately destroying vaccine doses. They then trick the system by claiming that an unvaccinated client has been vaccinated, which is registered on EVDS so they can then receive the vaccine passport. This unethical conduct is applauded by customers who are hostile to vaccines.
- **Pharmacies unpaid:** Many private pharmacies which are vaccine sites have not been paid by the Dept of Health, frequently for up to 4 months. This is leading to some pharmacies to withdraw.
- **Mental health** issues as a consequence of the pandemic are often forgotten, but these have a very large impact on families, communities and health systems ([here](#)). This is an area that needs attention in messaging.
- **Online / offline.** Online social media discussions repeat similar misinformation week after week with little apparent progress. However, there are many reports from around the country that on-the-ground understanding of vaccination is increasing – knowledge of vaccine issues is improving, but logistical barriers and nervousness remain.
- **Micro-supply issues:** While there is enough supply of Covid vaccines in the country as a whole, there are many reports of there not being sufficient doses at specific vaccination sites. Nurses come to a mobile vaccination site with 200 doses in a cool bag, and there are many more people wanting to be vaccinated, leading to many people being frustrated. For example, in Eldorado Park people queued from 6.30am and the doses ran out before everyone was vaccinated, and people were told to return the next day. Similarly, UNICEF reported micro-level planning problems with many sites running out of vaccine during the Vooma Weekend.
- **Reasons for not vaccinating:** There is still many people vaccine-hesitant, including healthworkers ([here](#)). These are the main reasons given for not vaccinating in SA:
 - Concern about vaccine safety
 - Travelling time to access vaccination centres
 - Difficulty with decision making due to different brand names and reactions to severe side effects

MISINFORMATION

- **MISINFO:** ~~There is no harm in buying a vaccine certificate without being vaccinated; you're actually being clever.~~ **TRUTH:** People selling vaccine certificates are breaking the law. Buying a certificate is supporting criminal activity and undermines the national effort to end Covid. Get vaccinated (see [here](#)).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Vaccines cause infertility in men and negatively impacts their sexual performance.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support these claims but getting COVID19 can negatively impact fertility and sexual function (see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Vaccines are poisonous and there have been many deaths caused by vaccines in SA which are hidden and not reported.~~ **TRUTH:** There is simply no verifiable evidence to support these claims ([here](#)). However vaccines can have side effects which are mostly minor, though there can be more serious ones which probably are under-reported, which is problematic (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Covid and vaccines are the way that 'whites' are controlling and killing Africans.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support the claim that Covid was manufactured to kill – over 6 billion doses have been administered worldwide ([here](#)) with very few deaths as a result of vaccination ([here](#)). It is a major problem that there aren't enough vaccines coming to Africa as a whole ([here](#)), while South Africa is in the fortunate position of having enough vaccine supply.

PROPOSED ACTION FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Focus on teenagers:** With people aged 12 – 17 being able to vaccinate next week, a large media campaign is necessary to explain the issues. The fact that parental consent is unnecessary is likely to be very contentious, and needs to be clearly explained.
- **Training for persuasive communications:** There are useful guides to how best to talk with people hesitant to getting vaccinated ([here](#)). These and similar guides should be widely circulated to encourage conversations that could lead to people changing their behaviour.

ISSUES RAISED FOR FOLLOW-UP:

- **After-exam parties:** Request that after-exam parties at high schools to be considered. They would be only open to teenagers who have vaccinated, and could be a strong motivator to get vaccinated due to a 'fear of missing out'. Suggestion that this idea could be explored between the Department of Health and the Department of Basic Education.
- **Micro-supply problems:** Suggestion for greater planning local level to align supply and demand. Better engagement with the local population can gauge the likely numbers coming to a mobile or pop-up site. Provide more doses to mobile units (while maintaining the cold-chain). If vaccine doses are about to run out at a site, there could be a mechanism to call for re-supply with more doses so that everyone who is waiting for vaccinated can be.

- **Unethical pharmacy:** Some private pharmacies deliberately destroy doses of Covid vaccine and trick the EVDS system so that unvaccinated people appear to be vaccinated. They should be reported to the SA Pharmacy Council.

METHODOLOGY AND COLLABORATION

The Social Listening & Infodemiology team that produces this report is part of the Risk Communications & Community Engagement Working Group of the Department of Health. 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**
- **Covid Hotline:** Reports from the national Covid call centre
- **Org:** NDOH Covid WhatsApp system
- **WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)**
- **UNICEF:** digital analysis of content on Google, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and digital news
- **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
- **Community Constituency Front (CCF), People’s Vaccine Campaign**
- **Centre for Communication Impact, Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change, Section 27**
- **Medical Research Council, National Institute for Communicable Diseases, Right To Care,**
- **SA Vaccination and Immunisation Centre, Health Systems Trust, HSRC, IPSOS**
- **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, DG Murray Trust, People’s Health Movement, Business for SA, SA Minerals Council, Wits Reproductive Health & HIV Institute, UN Verified, HealthEnabled, Deaf SA, SA National Council for the Blind, Treatment Action Campaign and Disability SA.

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