

South Africa Covid and Vaccine Social Listening Report

11 April 2022, Report 44

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

KEY TRENDS

Increased Covid cases prompting discussion. There has been a sizeable increase in engagement regarding the increasing number of Covid cases. Many believe this marks the start of the 5th wave, or has occurred as a consequence of the relaxation of regulations. Unfortunately, it has also resulted in conspiracies suggesting that the government are manipulating case numbers for their own political agenda. Professor Karim believes South Africans can expect the 5th wave in early May, but states that this depends on a new Covid variant developing ([here](#)).

End of the State of Disaster = “Covid is over”. The response to the end of the State of Disaster has been largely mixed. There is widespread relief as it appears we are coming out of the pandemic. There is widespread feeling that Covid is ‘over’, it’s no longer a concern and that government ‘no longer cares about Covid’. Some have even taken the end of the State of Disaster to mean an end to the need to vaccinate.

Confusion regarding latest regulations. There appears to be great confusion about the new regulations ([here](#)) and their practical application, with some exploiting this confusion and spreading further misinformation ([here](#)). Mask wearing is a particular source of confusion. Some scientists have expressed concerns about the relaxation of regulations. Others feel the regulations should have been relaxed entirely and are lobbying against mask wearing indoors and other measures ([here](#)). Others feel that this decision to relax regulations confirms that the regulations were ‘all for nothing’ in the first place. Others believe that this is a good time to relax regulations, and support the government’s decision.

Frustration regarding finding of vaccination sites. Many describe frustration at not being able to find an open vaccination site. Several sites that once existed have now been closed, prompting further confusion. There is no comprehensive list compiled nationwide – the National Covid Contact Centre does not have a reliable list. There have also been reports of limited operating hours at vaccination sites. All these issues lead to frustration and willing people not being vaccinated.

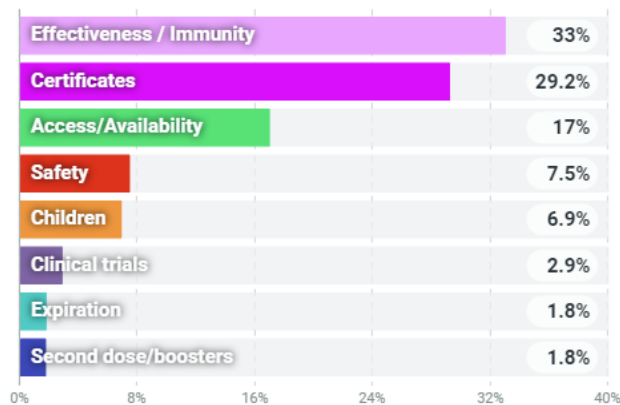
Rejection of communications regarding Covid and Covid vaccination. Unfortunately, many of the communications regarding Covid on social media are eliciting negative responses. People are ‘tired’ of Covid, don’t believe Covid is an issue anymore and ‘want their lives back’.

Response to second batch of Pfizer documents being released. Negative sentiment continues to be expressed in the wake of the second batch of Pfizer documents being released ([here](#)). It is felt that government are ignoring these documents and failing to respond, despite responses having been issued by the Department of Health.

Separate queues for people with documents and without documents. There have been reports that at some vaccination sites there are separate queues for people without documents. While many people without documents are South African, many foreigners are also in this category and this separation has led to fear of xenophobic behaviour.

Concerns regarding situation in China. On social media there have been calls for Chinese travellers to be prevented from entering SA due to the current situation in Shanghai. Others are suggesting that we pay close attention to the situation in Shanghai to avoid a similar situation here in SA. Professor Karim does not believe the threat from China is great as their current surge in infections is due to Omicron, a variant which has already been prevalent in SA ([here](#)).

Social media – general trends. Interest in the following search queries was rising on Google over the past week: “Covid-19 vaccine injury no-fault compensation scheme” (breakout search, 5,000% increase compared to previous week), “Biovac covid vaccine” (+3,850%), “Proof of vaccination code South Africa” (+200%), “proof of vaccination South Africa for travel” (+200%). This graphics shows the interest in specific sub-topics:



Covid regulations for businesses: Among other things, the new Covid regulations states an employer’s right to implement a vaccine mandate and clarifies the grounds on which employees can refuse the vaccine. Employers could now implement an admission policy, which would require employees to present either a vaccination certificate or a negative Covid test (at the employee’s expense) in order to enter the office ([here](#)). This has elicited a negative response from many on social media and online ([here](#)).

National Covid Contact Centre main call drivers: One of the main reasons for calls to the Centre is still the difficulties people experience in getting vaccination certificates, due to technical issues. Similarly, a large volume of calls are still regarding citizens trying to locate vaccination sites. Other calls relate to agents needing to edit details for citizens in the EVDS system, normally due to errors in entering the details on the citizen’s part. Following the President’s address on Monday, there have been enquiries regarding compensation for injuries related to vaccination and these have been redirected to the appropriate reporting channels (call centre or MedSafety app).

National Covid Contact Centre opens line for healthcare workers: The Contact Centre added a new service for Healthcare Workers which went live on the 1st of April. Healthcare workers are provided with an option to access support and counselling should they require it. Support services are available to all frontline and healthcare workers including healthcare staff, administrative staff and healthcare personnel including porters, receptionists, care workers etc.

DISTRICTS REPORTS

- **Harry Gwala (KZN):** Vaccine acceptance is increasing in youth 12 – 17 with parents encouraging them and the Mayor’s Cup sports event promoting vaccination. People don’t understand why the President had not lifted the State of Disaster as “there is no Covid any more”. KeReady2Flex has encouraged some youth to vaccinate.
- **Bojanala (North West):** Vaccination sites must come to people where they live or work, e.g. farms as many won’t go to the vaccination site. Foreign nationals fear that vaccination is a strategy for the government to eliminate them from the country. KeReady2Flex has helped motivate some youth, though others say that KeReady is for rich youth in urban areas, not them. Many vaccination sites close to early in the afternoon so that working people cannot attend after work. Some of the vaccination teams aren’t working seriously. Many myths on Covid and vaccination are still circulating.
- **Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti (North West):** Youth are exposed to the internet and are influenced by the anti-vax misinformation, such as people become zombies after vaccination; the vaccine will kill you; side effects are severe; places a micro-chip; the vaccine is just for older people as they are the only ones who get sick with Covid. Demand creation is hampered by a lack of transport, rain and weak cooperation with various local partners. More vaccination sites have been set up in more convenient

locations which reduces, though transport to sites remains a problem for many. KeReady has helped to motivate youth to vaccinate – but there is still a huge problem with most youth not wanting to vaccinate

- **Central Karoo (Western Cape):** People do not understand why the Covid vaccine is still a priority while they do not hear about a high infection rate. Some people are waiting for Winter and if the infection rate increases then they may decide to vaccinate. Several people have difficulties with getting vaccination certificate – someone helped them register originally on the other person's phone, so now they cannot receive the certificate to their own number. Some youth do vaccinate now to help them apply for opportunities. Very few people are coming for a first vaccination, almost all are for boosters. Peer-pressure influences youth not to get vaccinated.
- **Garden Route (Western Cape):** Some youth in sports teams say they don't need vaccination as they are already fit through exercise. Many youth feel that there is no more Covid, so they see no need to vaccinate or wear masks. Youth 18 – 35 particularly still believe myths about the vaccine.
- **Namakwa (Western Cape):** Youth, both male and female, are still very hesitant to take the vaccine. Unvaccinated people are unhappy at not being allowed to attend sports events or employment opportunities, feeling 'bullied' by the government. Many over 50s came for a booster recently, especially in the Nama Khoi area. Much publicity has been distributed for KeReady, including in supportive local newspapers. Religious groups remain a problem undermining vaccine confidence. Misinformation circulating includes fears that government is controlling when the 5th wave will happen, the Covid virus is so weak that vaccination is not necessary, and that vaccines cause infertility and erectile dysfunction. Drug users (Tik and dagga) are not interested in vaccinating, saying the drugs will protect them. Youth feel that government has failed them by not creating opportunities to study, train or get a job – government is only interested in the vaccine which is irrelevant to them.
- **Swartland (Western Cape):** School learners do not want to vaccinate, though vaccine acceptance is increasing in older youth. There now is good partnership with community workers in the district promoting vaccination. Many youth still have incorrect information on vaccines and so are scared of them, especially the needle. Some who had some side effects from a first dose now refuse further vaccinations as they don't want the side effects again

MISINFORMATION

- **MISINFO:** ~~The prediction of a 5th wave shows that the pandemic is manipulated to control the population.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this. Predictions come from carefully considered epidemiological models, based on previous experience. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Pfizer's own data shows over 1,291 side effects of Covid vaccine.~~ **TRUTH:** It is true that a report from Pfizer released in 2021 does list 1,291 potential side effects of any new drug. However, this is NOT a list of side effects of their Covid vaccine; instead it is a list of the possible side effects that their study was watching out for. The vaccine is safe, being authorised by the SA Health Products Regulatory Authority and similar bodies around the world. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Covid vaccines kill many people and there is a high chance they can kill you.~~ **TRUTH:** This is not true. Most side effect are mild and self-resolving. Severe adverse events due to vaccines are tracked very closely ([here](#) and [here](#)). There have been no deaths in SA due to Covid vaccination ([here](#)). Over 11 billion shots of Covid vaccines have been administered globally ([here](#)), with a small number of deaths caused by vaccines. While it is difficult to get reliable statistics of vaccine-related deaths globally, in the United Kingdom, over 141 million doses have been given, and medical authorities believe just 9 people have died due to the vaccine ([here](#)). By way of contrast, the UK has had over 163,000 deaths from Covid ([here](#)). See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). Most people who lost their lives to Covid in South Africa in the 4th wave were unvaccinated or only partially vaccinated. See [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Foreigners will be deported if they try and get vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** While vulnerable people especially may be fearful, anyone in South Africa can be vaccinated, regardless of nationality. Foreigner are not arrested and deported while being vaccinated. See [here](#) and [here](#)

- **MISINFO:** Vaccines cause infertility and erectile dysfunction. **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support these claims. Covid however can impair sexual performance. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Covid booster vaccines are dangerous. **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. Boosters shots are normal practice for many vaccinations. The vaccine for booster shots is the same as for the previous vaccinations, and usually has similar side effects. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Covid cases are low so now we don't need to vaccinate. **TRUTH:** Having lower case numbers is wonderful, but this doesn't mean there is no reason to be vaccinated. If you are unvaccinated you are more likely to spread Covid and encourage variants. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Covid vaccination can give you HIV. **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim at all. Vaccines, including Covid vaccines cannot cause AIDS / HIV and do not make us more susceptible to contracting this virus. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Covid vaccines are dangerous and are linked to "vaccine-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome" or "VAIDS". **TRUTH:** There is no evidence at all to support the claim of immunodeficiency being related to Covid vaccines. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Vaccines don't work – if they did they would completely stop us from getting Covid. **TRUTH:** Anyone vaccinated is less likely to get Covid, and if they do get Covid it will most likely be far less severe. See [here](#) , [here](#) and [here](#).

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance & VIRAL FACTS

This section comes from the World Health Organisation's Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA) who carry out social listening on Covid and vaccines throughout Africa, and produce Viral Facts videos to counter misinformation.

Key concerning COVID-19 misinformation trends this week are:

- Vaccinated die at a greater rate than non-vaccinated
- Vaccinated are not protected from anything
- It is better to get Omicron than the vaccine

THE IMPORTANCE OF GETTING VACCINATED AS COUNTRIES RELAX COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS: Dropbox ([here](#)), Twitter ([here](#)), Facebook ([here](#))

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Need for clear communication on the new regulations.** Current communication does not appear to sufficiently clarify confusion around mask wearing and other new regulations. Communication on the regulations may be more understandable if interventions are linked to proposed benefit, e.g. wear a mask indoors, as indoors the ventilation is poorer. It would also help to explain that regulations have been relaxed because such a large number of vulnerable older people have been vaccinated. However, despite this progress we need to emphasise that further relaxation of regulations is only going to be possible once 70% of the population have vaccinated, as stated by the health minister ([here](#)).
- **Need to emphasise that Covid is not over.** Many people believe that the relaxation of regulations marks the end of the pandemic. This is not the case and communication needs to make this clear. Discussions are needed around the emphasis now being on personal responsibility, on looking after your own health, on protecting those you love etc. Continued messaging around the threat Covid poses is also important but needs to be targeted, topical and fresh, to break through the condition of Covid-fatigue that is increasingly being observed in our population. Possibility of including messaging on all future social media posts and resources to emphasise that we are still in a pandemic.
- **Vital work on the ground.** The UJ/HSRC research (mentioned in previous reports) suggests there are many millions of people in SA who are willing to vaccinate but have not done so due to practical barriers. These people are overwhelmingly in poorer areas such as informal settlements and rural areas - access

to vaccination is an equity issue. Pop-up sites, longer opening hours, taking vaccinations to the vulnerable and vaxi taxi linked to community mobilisation and collaboration with trusted local leaders can lead to millions more people being vaccinated, allowing SA to reach the 70% vaccination target. This appears to be the most likely way to make the vaccination campaign a success. This should be the priority approach to controlling Covid.

- **Updated lists of operating vaccination sites.** Information on which vaccination sites are working and their opening hours is not easily accessible. The National Covid Contact Centre does not have an updated list. As a result, many people going to vaccination are failing to get one. As well as frustration and the waste of time and money, these people are less likely to return, meaning that some willing people remain unvaccinated. This should be resolved urgently.
- **Certificate for undocumented people vaccinating.** The emphasis on encouraging people without official documents, such as an ID or passport (both South African and from other countries), is very welcome. However, undocumented people currently are not able to receive the electronic certificates via EVDS. This is problematic as many companies, educational organisations and entertainments require these certificates. It is an issue of fairness, and given that most people without documents tend to be the marginalised and poor, this is an equity issue. Recommendation that this should be addressed.

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
- **Praekelt.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), Covid Hotline, Health Systems Trust**
- **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 RESOURCES

Background info for this report	Here
SA Corona virus website	Here
Real 411 to report misinfo	Here

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, HealthEnabled, Deaf SA, SA National Council for the Blind, Treatment Action Campaign and Disability SA.

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