

## Who is responsible for protecting my health during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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**SPECIAL EDITION**

### **Abstract**

Since the report of the first COVID-19 infected person in South Africa, COVID-19 moved from being a distant threat to a new reality overnight. Metaphorically, COVID-19 could be described as rain, and in order to be protected one would need to stand under an umbrella. The fundamental question that stems from this is who is holding this protective umbrella? Is the government holding the umbrella or are we holding the umbrella? In this article/commentary/perspective, we briefly discuss the responsibility of the South African government and the individual during this global pandemic, the reasoning behind the implementation of lockdown and the consequences thereof. We conclude that both government and citizens need to cooperatively take responsibility and work together to fight COVID-19. The protective umbrella needs to be held by both government and by ourselves.

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### **Keywords**

*COVID-19, health, South Africa, opinion*

As 2019 came to an end, a new year was in sight bringing hope and new opportunities. Who could have predicted that 2020 would indeed lead to new opportunities, but on the backdrop of a highly disruptive and devastating global pandemic known as as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, China, at the end of 2019. Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was confirmed as the causative agent. On 11 March 2020 the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic [1]. The origin of the virus remains to be confirmed, but it is believed to spread via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can remain on surfaces for extended periods and can be transferred to any person who encounters them. This year, 2020, has seen the world working together to fight a common enemy, COVID-19.

South Africa waited in anticipation following the report of the initial cases in China. Would South Africa's culturally and genetically diverse population be protected or spared from this pandemic? With the report of the first COVID-19 infected person in South Africa, COVID-19 moved from being a distant threat to a new reality overnight. Along with the uncertainties of how COVID-19 would impact South Africa, the question that immediately arose was "Who is responsible for protecting me as an individual and ensuring my health during this COVID-19 pandemic?"

Metaphorically, COVID-19 could be described as rain, and in order to be protected one would need to stand under an umbrella. The fundamental question that stems from this is who is holding this protective umbrella? Is the government holding the umbrella or are we holding the umbrella? The WHO guidance document on pandemic influenza preparedness and response states that "While all sectors of society are involved in pandemic preparedness and response, the national government is the natural leader for overall coordination and communication efforts" [2]. As the leader, the government is responsible for liaising with (i) health sectors to provide critical epidemiological, clinical and laboratory information which can be utilised to inform the government and the public regarding measures required to reduce the spread of the virus, as well as to generate information/statistics regarding potential morbidity and mortality rates; (ii) non-health sectors to enable essential operations and services to be provided during the pandemic; (iii) civil society organisations who can assist with raising awareness regarding the pandemic, communicating accurate information to communities, and assist government to provide essential services to citizens; and (iv) families and individuals who play a role in reducing the spread of the virus through adopting measures outlined by the government such as covering coughs and sneezes, hand-washing, social distancing, voluntary isolation or quarantine of exposed and sick people [2]. Table 1 conveys the responses of the authors

to the question “Who is responsible for protecting my health during the COVID-19 pandemic?”.

In a country such as South Africa, which has a large socioeconomic divide and which is culturally and genetically diverse, government must play an important role in taking responsibility for the health of its citizens. A lack of understanding regarding the spread and transmission of COVID-19, high levels of socialisation and ineffective social distancing have made it difficult for South Africa to allow individuals to be solely responsible for their own health during this pandemic. On 15 March 2020, the President of the Republic of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, addressed the nation on measures to combat COVID-19. In this address, he declared a national state of disaster in terms of the South African Disaster Management Act, informing the public of the commencement of a travel ban on foreign nationals from high-risk countries (Italy, Iran, South Korea, Spain, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and China), effective from 18 March 2020, and encouraged social distancing. He also called on all South Africans to minimise physical contact by using elbow greetings rather than shaking hands, prohibited gatherings of more than 100 people and announced the closing of schools effective from 18 March 2020. In his closing statement, the president noted that “This epidemic will pass. But it is up to us to determine how long it will last, how damaging it will be, and how long it will take our economy and our country to recover. It is true that we are facing a grave emergency. But if we act together, if we act now, and if we act decisively, we will overcome it” [3].

Good hygiene practices and social distancing alone are not enough to curb the spread of COVID-19. The concept of “flattening the curve”, i.e. slow down the spread of the virus, is an important approach, which has led to countries around the world initiating lockdown protocols whereby citizens are confined to their homes for a period of time, only being allowed to leave under certain conditions such as to purchase groceries, to seek medical help, or to provide essential services. This approach has not only assisted in limiting contact between people but has also provided governments with the time needed to expand healthcare capacity, and in so doing, has avoided health care systems from being overwhelmed. Although the curve has been flattened, it is likely that the “area under the curve”, i.e. the total number of people infected, might not be altered. Furthermore, lockdown provides time to prepare, equip and train healthcare workers to better manage COVID-19 patients. South Africa chose to follow this approach on 24 March 2020 when President Ramaphosa announced a 3-week nationwide lockdown with severe restrictions on travel and movement effective from midnight 26 March 2020 [3]. Many South Africans understood the reason for these drastic measures and applauded the President for choosing to put his citizens first. However, as the socioeconomic consequences of the lockdown began to impact on individuals and businesses, resistance began to mount from

sectors of society. Loss of jobs, closing of businesses and loss of income, to name a few, affected many families. It became and remains a balancing act between protecting the population and saving the economy. The government implemented several relief strategies to provide support to those who were affected by the lockdown through setting up a solidarity fund to support small business and by providing food parcels to the poor and the jobless, to name a few, but were these strategies enough? On 9 April 2020 the President announced an extension of the nation-wide lockdown for a further 2 weeks to allow the healthcare system more time to prepare for the expected increase of COVID-19 cases [3]. The premise was that lifting the lockdown too quickly could lead to a rapid and uncontrollable spread of the virus which would overwhelm the healthcare system, ultimately leading to poorer patient care and potentially higher mortality rates.

On 23 April 2020 the President announced a gradual and phased exit from the lockdown. This involves the implementation of a risk adjusted strategy through which deliberate and cautious action will be taken to ease the lockdown restrictions [3]. The challenge that now arises as we move forward from a nationwide lockdown is how to re-open the economy without putting the nation at risk of greater rates of infection. The phased approach comprises of five levels of lockdown with level 5 being the most stringent. South Africa moved from level 5 to level 4 on 1 May 2020 and to level 3 on 1 June 2020. Moving down the levels, decisions have had to be made as to which businesses can resume and to what extent, and this has been met with some resistance from civil society groups. It was clear from the onset that this would not be an easy undertaking, and that the economy would be affected no matter what strategy was implemented. The balance between protecting citizens and saving the economy remains a constant challenge. As the restrictions are progressively lifted, the responsibility to ensure one's own safety begins to shift more towards the individual. Putting aside concerns regarding the wisdom of some of the decisions taken by government, each individual needs to take personal responsibility. This includes responsibility for one's own safety and the safety of others by (i) keeping a distance of 1.5 m from other people; (ii) regular washing or sanitising of hands; (iii) regular cleaning of surfaces; (iv) wearing a cloth mask in public; and (v) avoiding crowded areas. It is also important to consider the vulnerable members of our communities (those over 60 years of age, people with chronic diseases, and others) and to take the necessary steps to protect them. Wearing a mask has been considered an act of altruism, since its efficacy in protecting the wearer is limited, but it does reduce spread from an infected person to an uninfected person. Responsibility also shifts from the government to the workplace as employees started to return to work. The workplace is responsible for protecting employees by (i) making arrangements for social distancing at work; (ii) providing sanitiser or facilities for handwashing; (iii) sanitising workplace surfaces regularly; (iv) screening employees daily for symptoms; and (v) ensuring that facilities are available for self-isolation or quarantine for suspected cases.

It can thus be concluded that both government and citizens need to cooperatively take responsibility and work together to fight COVID-19. The protective umbrella needs to be held by both government and by ourselves. We need to consider the words of President Ramaphosa from his speech of 24 May 2020: “Now, as we enter the next phase of our struggle against the coronavirus, it is once again your actions that will determine the fate of our nation. As individuals, as families, as communities, it is you who will determine whether we experience the devastation that so many other countries have suffered, or whether we can spare our people, our society and our economy from the worst effects of this pandemic”[3].

**Table 1. Opinions from scientists in response to the question “Who is responsible for protecting my health during the COVID-19 pandemic?”**

Opinion 1	<p>I don't think the President is in any way favouring one socioeconomic group over the other. If anything, I think he's doing what he can for the benefit of every South African. We must also bear in mind that most countries around the globe are feeling the economic impact of the virus and it is not unique to us as it is shown in the global financial markets. As a person who understands the social, political and economic dynamics of a township community, if we (township people) were to be hit by the virus, it will have an impact on most people; including those in the suburban areas and not forgetting the health care system. We need to remember that most of the working-class individuals (cleaners, gardeners, cashiers, factory workers, miners, etc) and even some of our essential workers live in the townships. In addition to that, the majority of these individuals use public transportation. If the majority of Soweto residents were to be infected by the virus and remain in quarantine, it does not only mean that the majority of Johannesburg businesses will be short-staffed but also that these said individuals could've carried the virus into the city had they not remained isolated. This could also negatively affect the economy so it's unfortunately a double-sided coin.</p>
Opinion 2	<p>In my opinion, it will depend on the society/country as well as the culture of the people. For example, in Sweden, the government did not call for a nationwide lockdown but make it the responsibility of each individual to take care of their health. In such a society where socialization is very low, the people are well educated &amp; health conscious, as well as the respect for one another in public spaces, it will be easier to manage the spread of Covid-19 to a certain extent without a nationwide lockdown.</p> <p>In the context of South Africa, with a mixture of different cultures and people of different socioeconomic status, and with a majority of the population not being well educated, the government has a bigger role to play in taking responsibility for the health of its citizens through a nationwide lockdown. Not many people in our society understand the spread of the disease, socialization is also very high, social distancing and understanding of the impact on others is low, this makes it difficult to allow individuals to be responsible for their own health because it puts in danger the health of others especially the vulnerable population. Even those who can take great care and responsibility for their own health are still at risk because we all share common public spaces with those who do not care or have no knowledge of self-responsibility such as the shops, restaurants, parks etc. Hence, the question of who is responsible for my health is very dependent on the society and should be country or community specific.</p>

<p>Opinion 3</p>	<p>There are no easy, straight-forward answers to the questions you have posted. Ultimately, we who are educated and informed need to take responsibility for our own health and the health of others we get in contact with. One cannot control the actions of others and therefore need to take control of your own actions to safeguard your own health and safety. By taking control of your own actions you assist the government who ultimately also have a responsibility to ensure that all South Africans feel that they are cared for and are provided with the best chance to remain healthy. This is not an easy task as cultural preferences, living conditions and lack of infrastructure in many of the more vulnerable communities make the implementation of practices, such as social distancing very difficult and consequently almost impossible to contain the virus. In my opinion, lockdown is a way to restrict movement, which prevents or at least slow the spread of the virus outside of the "hot-spot" community pockets. It is well understood that initial lockdown was to flatten-the-curve, assisting the health services to get ready.</p> <p>In my opinion, the economy is going to be affected no matter what strategy is followed. Lifting lockdown too quickly might lead to a fast, uncontrollable spread of the virus. And just may lead to people feel very unsupported and even more vulnerable. And this despair might bring its own turmoil. The more people are infected the more people need to stay at home for two weeks to self-quarantine. An uncontrollable spread of the virus may lead to many more deaths, many of these deaths may be an individual that was the only breadwinner of the family, bringing now grief and lack-of-income. I am not sure what the cultural take of many South Africans will be on such hardship. Covid19 infections in large companies like mines will result in a significant amount of people that will need to self-quarantine. At least a slow lift of the lockdown will prepare companies to operate with many workers absent. So, there is no easy to take on this.</p> <p>I am glad I am not the one that needs to make these decisions. It is clear that this pandemic is emphasizing the socio-economic differences in our beautiful country. Us that are privileged to live a relative luxury need to be careful not to be insensitive to fellow South Africans. We are all in this together.</p>
<p>Opinion 4</p>	<p>On the topic of who is responsible for taking care of my health, I think a distinction needs to be made. I personally think it is my responsibility to look after my health, however we are in a global pandemic and I think government does have a role in the general populace's health. Especially in the case of people who maybe don't understand why the health guidelines work. Epidemiology tells us that we are dealing with an infectious disease that will spread given the chance so try as I might to not get sick, I still rely on the choices of those I live with in order to remain healthy. In the topic of people's health vs, the economy, the only perspective I can offer is my own personal one, and I know if I were to get sick because of someone else's choices, I would resent them. As mentioned earlier, I don't think the solutions of other countries like Sweden can really be applied here, but I think the most important thing is that whatever uniquely African solution comes out of this, it's important that there is buy-in from everyone. That way we know everyone is on the same page and working together so that we can act effectively and cohesively. I think the way forward is that it is governments responsibility in part to help provide us with the tools and supportive legislation to allow us to take responsibility on an individual basis for our own health.</p>

Opinion 5	<p>I think the answer to that question ultimately lies with what the reality will be towards the end of this pandemic. When the world is open and moving, everyone will be responsible for their own health, as it's always been. In the long run it is the only enforceable strategy. Our country, unlike others, does not have the luxury nor the resources to maintain an extended or repeated lockdown, and it is already being forced to open up. As people begin to move around, Covid19 infections will certainly pop up. It cannot be avoided, and across the globe as many countries only begin to ease their own restrictions, they have already reported a surge in new cases. Until we have a vaccine or standardised treatment, Covid19 cannot be avoided. How long will any country be able to continue such strategies? In the case of South Africa, not for long - so I believe it is the Government's job to educate and empower it's citizens with accurate, transparent data and information to the best of their ability, to equip our healthcare professionals with everything they might need in surplus, and then to let the citizens of South Africa go back to their lives. Because it is the citizen's responsibility to then use that knowledge to take care of themselves and their loved ones. In the end, even during a lockdown, I can only be responsible for myself and the ones I love. Furthermore, people will only maintain their behaviour if it is done willingly and to that end, I think educating the populace will go a long way. Fear and threats inspire rebellion and uprising. Only compromise and trust can yield compliance.</p>
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