MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION STATEMENT ON ANNOUNCING THE OUTCOME OF THE HUMAN SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL (HSRC) SECOND SURVEY AND MEASURES IMPLEMENTED BY THE DEPARTMNT OF SCIENCE AND INNOVATION IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

26 April 2020

Programme Director Minister Mthembu
Deputy Minister Buti Manamela
The Human Science Research Council Board
Director General Dr. Phil Mjwara
HSRC CEO, Professor Crain Soudien
The Research Team, led by Dr Zuma
DDGs present
Members of the media
Ladies and gentlemen

Good Afternoon

Communities are at the heart of any disease outbreak and health emergency response. With the deep inequalities and poverty that we face as a nation, flattening the curve through social distancing and enhanced

hygiene practices will only be successful if we understand key social and behavioural factors that make this difficult.

The work that will be presented today is based on cutting-edge and world class research and analysis.

Led by our entity, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the research was made possible through a partnership not only of key social science research organisations in South Africa but also with the banking sector and non-governmental organisations.

I would like to thank all these partners who have made valuable contributions and would like to use the opportunity to call on other businesses and civil society organisations to join the partnership in order to strengthen our response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The research that will be presented today confirms many conclusions that were already factored into South Africa's COVID-19 response strategy but like all good social science research, it has help to quantify the extent of the challenge and provide a more nuanced way of understanding the challenge.

This includes the issue of tobacco and alcohol access which received considerable attention on social and mainstream media.

Good social science research also helps to highlight areas that require greater attention by society as a collective. One such area that emerged during the research was access to chronic medication.

This vital scientific work draws on a number of information sources including two large surveys, the first when the lockdown just began and the second which happen well into the lockdown phase.

The results that will be presented today draw on the second survey. The good response rate for both surveys benefitted from both social and the mainstream helping to get people to respond.

We commenced with this second wave of the survey from Tuesday the 7th April 2020 – Tuesday 14 April 2020 and looked specifically at the lockdown implemented from 27 March to 16 April.

The survey was conducted on the social media platform Moya Messaging which was accessed data free.

The survey looked at some of the following issues:

- What type of community the respondent lives in,
- Access to services for drinking and sanitation,
- Knowledge about the coronavirus including preventive measures, primary concerns about the virus, does a lockdown help to prevent the spread of the virus,
- Perceptions about personal risk in relation to contracting the virus,
- Travel, movement and adherence to social distancing guidelines,
- Access to food during the lockdown,
- Testing for COVID-19 and Coronavirus,
- The socio-economic impact of the lockdown on the respondent and his/her household,

- Whether the respondent was subjected to gender based violence during the lockdown,
- Activities undertaken by the respondent during the lockdown.

The second part of the survey included telephonic qualitative questions which provided deeper responses from respondents, particularly those with minimal internet access of out of coverage range. This is particularly important noting the digital divide in South Africa and the essential need to service communities most at risk.

I would like to thank all South Africans who supported and participated in this work and we count on your further support going forward.

Before, we can present the outcome of our research work, I would like to highlight some of our major interventions as the NSI in response to the COVID-19 epidemic.

As soon as the gravity of Covid-19 came to light, the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) sprang into action, engaging its entities and Programmes to determine how the national system of innovation (NSI) could respond and how to coordinate the NSI's contribution.

The Department is part of the National Joint Operations Committee on Covid-19, which involves all relevant government departments. The structure is aimed at coordinating government-wide efforts and reporting to the National Command Council on Covid-19.

Mobilising the NSI

The NSI identified the following potential research and innovation projects/activities on which to focus:

- Diagnostic tests.
- Targeted surveillance.
- Therapeutic trials for treatment, including prophylactic treatment of health care workers and highly exposed individuals.
- Monoclonal antibodies, immunoglobulins and molecular epidemiology.
- Vaccine development.
- Data and evidence. • Ventilators.

The entities involved to date in the NSI response are the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA), the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and the South African National Space Agency (SANSA).

Programmes that are contributing include the Strategic Health Innovation Partnership (SHIP), the South African Centre for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis (SACEMA), the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), the Centre of Excellence for Biomedical Tuberculosis Research, the Technology Stations Programme, and the TIA diagnostics and medical equipment programmes.

The search for a vaccine

No Covid-19 vaccine trials are currently being undertaken in South Africa. In terms of international vaccine research, two of the vaccines being investigated are based on plant expression systems.

The CSIR and University of Cape Town are using plant- based expression technologies (also called biopharming), and have proven their ability to locally produce vaccines in plant-based expression systems. Cape Bio Pharms is in discussion with Biovac to assist with final filtration, formulation and filling, should a plant-based vaccine be approved.

The Solidarity trial of Covid-19 treatments

South Africa is participating in an international study of treatments for Covid-19 in hospitalised patients, who are receiving drug regimens believed to have an effect on the respiratory disease.

The Solidarity trial is coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO), the main objective being to provide reliable estimates of the effects of antiviral treatments on in-hospital mortality. The secondary objective is to assess the effects of such antivirals on duration of hospital stay and on receipt of ventilation or intensive care.

The trial compares four treatment options against standard of care, to assess their relative effectiveness against Covid-19. By enrolling patients in multiple countries, the Solidarity trial aims to rapidly discover whether any of the drugs slow disease progression or improve survival. Other drugs can be added based on emerging evidence.

Until there is sufficient evidence, the WHO has cautioned against physicians and medical associations recommending or administering these unproven treatments to patients with Covid-19, or people self-medicating with them.

Meanwhile, the Department and the SAMRC are in discussion with the Medicines for Malaria Venture to explore the effectiveness of other anti-malaria and TB drugs against Covid-19.

The drive to produce ventilators

It is now widely recognised that a key issue that will determine the success of responses to Covid-19 is the availability of adequate numbers of ventilators. Working with a range of parties, the DSI is part of a process to support efforts to formulate and implement strategies for the development and manufacture of ventilators in the country.

Covid-19 core situational awareness platform

On the Thursday, 9 April, I hosted President Ramaphosa at the CSIR, home to the core situational awareness platform for COVID-19.

The centre, led by the Department of Health in partnership with the Department of Science and Innovation and its entity the CSIR, provides nearly real-time analytics and dashboards on the coronavirus outbreak per province, district, local municipality and ward. The platform also provides a single view of the reality of the spread of coronavirus across the country.

The centre's particularly useful capability is the CMORE app, a mobile visualisation platform used by community health workers to record screening data and symptoms and transmit information to the centre. The app enables a near-live display of the results of the work being conducted by the Household Screening and Testing Programme.

The data and insights generated by the centre are a significant input for decision- making by the National Coronavirus Command Council chaired by the President.

The work being done at the centre produces detailed data not only on the spread of coronavirus but also minute detail on the availability of hospitals, hotels, lodges, boarding houses and schools that can be used in the fight against the pandemic.

Another Department of Science and Innovation entity involved in a data initiative is SANSA. The Space Agency is busy with the mapping of spaza shops to support the Department of Small Business Development in rolling out Covid-19 business support schemes.

Support for Covid-19 facilities

The Department has also been approached by the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure to deploy fuel cells for some medical facilities in rural areas. The fuel cells are ready for roll-out, and while they were earmarked for another area, the process of rolling them out was put on hold due to Covid-19. Seven stationary fuel cell units are ready and no additional funding will be required for their deployment.

International coordination of the Covid-19 response

The Department of Science and Innovation is also leading various engagements with international partners looking at sharing experiences, benchmarking and identification of possible joint interventions, especially in the SADC and African region.

On 1 April 2020, through of International Cooperation and Resources, we led the South African delegation in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) discussion on "STI readiness in times of emergency: The Covid-19 response".

It was clear from this discussion that much still needs to be researched on Covid-19 and that a global response is necessary, as the virus has shown its disregard for borders, social standing and status of economic development.

The OECD session was followed on the 3rd April by an engagement with the diplomatic community under the topic "Science diplomacy: Covid-19".

I thank all our stakeholders' and members of the public who when called upon rise above the occasion and contribute their time and resources in advancing our National System of Innovation.

We will keep on applying ourselves to our tasks, with the sole purpose of overcoming whatever challenges posed by the COVID-19 epidemic and beyond.

I now will call upon the research team to present the outcome of the survey

I thank you

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