

Pandemic politics

'Lockdown is obsolete – and doing more harm than good: expert.' The headline earlier this week in *BusinessTech*.^[1] And then this morning – 10 March 2022 – 'State of disaster not likely to be lifted yet despite cabinet pledge' in *BusinessDay*.^[2]

Let's look at the expert opinion in *BusinessTech*. Shabir Madhi – the expert cited, a globally acknowledged infectious disease and vaccinology specialist – says that the National State of Disaster should have been lifted months ago and the focus should have swung to the number of hospitalisations and deaths and not the number of cases. We still have restrictions on gatherings and events – crippling sectors of the economy that are struggling to recover from the worst of the lockdown. We still have mandatory mask wearing, indoors and outdoors, hand sanitisers everywhere, and singularly useless temperature checks. South Africa is still tracking the number of infections, when we should be looking at hospitalisations and deaths – now at the lowest they have been since the pandemic began.

Madhi has also pointed out that the target of 70% of the population being vaccinated is now irrelevant. Between 80% and 85% of the population have boosted immunity against the virus, either from previous infection or a combination of vaccination and infection, which also shows that our previous draconian lockdown restrictions failed dismally in preventing spread of the virus. In an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Madhi *et al.*^[3] say that we are now moving into the 'convalescent' phase of the pandemic, with good scientific data to back this up. In the fourth wave of the virus, there has been a massive decoupling of hospitalisations and deaths, and Madhi has pointed out that the number of deaths that we are likely to see from subsequent waves of SARS-CoV-2 will be similar to that seen from other preventable causes of death in countries like South Africa.

So what is the government's reasoning behind continuing the National State of Disaster, having pledged to end it this month (March 2022)? Apparently this is all about the government losing 'flexibility' to bring in further curfews, alcohol bans and other restrictions rapidly

should the rate of infections rise again suddenly. Our Department of Health is apparently working to bring in regulations for measures such as mask wearing within the National Health Act – ordinarily requiring public consultation and usually published at least a month before their intended implementation.

So, this is all about politics – yet again – and government control. We have immunity, both from previous infection and vaccination; we know how to treat severe disease; vulnerable people are no more vulnerable than they are to other diseases such as seasonal influenza, and can continue to take their usual precautions. There is no valid scientific reason to continue with any lockdown and restrictive measures. There is likely to be a seasonal rise in this virus as there is with every other respiratory virus. We are still going to see around 58 000 people die annually from tuberculosis and around 11 000 die annually from seasonal influenza. We will see further infections with SARS-CoV-2 and, yes, some deaths. Lift the National State of Disaster now and let us live our lives.



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1. Staff writer. Lockdown is obsolete – and doing more harm than good: expert. *BusinessTech*, 7 March 2022. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/565286/lockdown-is-obsolete-and-doing-more-harm-than-good-expert/> (accessed 10 March 2022).
2. Omarfee H, Kahn T. State of disaster not likely to be lifted yet despite cabinet pledge. *BusinessDay*, 10 March 2022. <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2022-03-10-state-of-disaster-not-likely-to-be-lifted-yet-despite-cabinet-pledge/> (accessed 10 March 2022).
3. Madhi SA, Kwarta G, Myers JE, et al. Population immunity and Covid-19 severity with omicron variant in South Africa. *N Engl J Med* 2022 (epub 23 February 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2119658>

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