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COVID-19: What workers should know

South Africa has surpassed 3 300 cases of COVID-19, a virus that has resulted in lockdowns of hundreds of countries and a global death toll of an estimated 180 000 people. Little is known about the virus that cannot be treated with antibiotics.

The risk of infection is greatest for persons living with or caring for an infected person. This includes healthcare workers, Emergency Medical staff and community care workers. Indeed, any worker in direct contact with the public is at risk. They include employees rendering services at borders, immigration, passport offices, unemployment insurance, food inspection, refugee board employees, laboratory workers, etc. Anyone who comes in proximity with an infected person is at risk for contracting the virus.

In response to the pandemic, the South Africa government locked down the country with only workers regarded as essential services being allowed to continue services. Health workers in public and private sectors continue to lead global responses to COVID-19, caring for the sickly and providing important advice for government leaders to consider when making policy decisions. The pandemic has, however, spread amongst health workers, resulting in unions urging authorities to ensure that health facilities provide sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE). The recent procurement of PPE from other countries should allay these concerns.

SEVEN things workers need to know

- 1 Know your workplace plan for a pandemic and determine your role in this.
- 2 Participate in training and education your workplace offers.
- 3 Know what "leave" policies your workplace has in place for sick leave, or for caring for family.
- 4 Wash your hands regularly (after using washrooms, before eating, after touching common surfaces such as door-knobs, railings, and telephones). Do not touch your eyes, mouth, or nose, as this allows the virus to enter your body.
- 5 Follow personal hygiene steps (cough into your arm).
- 6 Use PPE provided by your employer (N95 masks and/or safety gloves).
- 7 Have a home emergency kit and a personal/family plan for a pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 is expected to last for a long time and public service stakeholders should adapt through long-term strategic thinking. Several policy lessons can be garnered from the experience for workers, health managers and citizens. The primary need is for improved coordination across all departments in the Public Service. It is essential to avoid the silo, fragmented approach as healthcare is connected to economic development, good governance, social issues, and environmental factors.

Read more on COVID-19 and implications for the Public Service on the PSA website: <https://www.psa.co.za/articles-and-publications/psa-opinion>

