

Opinion – Is International Politics Damaging South Africa’s Health?

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, DEC 10 2021

To South African physicians, scientific disclosure must now come with a high price tag. As the first to discover the Omicron variant of Covid-19, South Africa’s reward has been an international embargo of sorts. In a detailed analysis, The Economist has set out how both the Omicron variant and travel bans are profoundly hurting the southern African economy and a population already on the bread line. 2021 has been South Africa’s annus horribilus. Its corrupt politicians diverted Covid-19 relief funds and hived off emergency donations to personal bank accounts. Riots claimed four hundred lives and energy cuts further crippled the economy. Yet, South African scientists have performed an exemplary job in responding to multiple health crises.

Not long after the discovery of Omicron, the UK shut its airports to flights from South Africa and several of its neighbouring states. The US and the EU followed suit. Many South Africans felt they were being unfairly punished for their country’s scientific rigour and openness. It is far from clear that Omicron actually originated in South Africa. And it is already spreading in the countries that have isolated the region. Moreover, the travel bans may also delay South African efforts to study the variant by impeding supplies of the reagents needed to isolate it. To add insult to injury the travel embargo has also jeopardized the free flow of expertise and specialist chemicals, thus also hampering African medics.

To some it looks like unequal treatment for Johannesburg compared with the endless patience shown to Beijing earlier in the crisis. This goes to show there are two standards on scientific disclosure. Many commentators believe the international community could have taken a more severe approach to China’s response to Covid-19. They point to the international political system’s boundless generosity towards China, which appears to have been the source of the pandemic, and who certainly withheld vital information from their international colleagues while they sought to contain the outbreak in Wuhan.

The international community and its media machine said little about China’s piecemeal and belated response to a looming pandemic. Indeed, some countries praised the PRC’s tardy implementation of city-wide zonal quarantines. Others are unhappy the World Health Organization (WHO) appears to have let politics get in the way of a robust response to a member state’s dangerous inaction. Even by the “kid-gloves” approach of the United Nations system, WHO inspections in China lacked a fundamental forensic discipline. Health investigators seemed embarrassingly accepting of laboratory information while every piece of epidemiological evidence pointed to confusion if not absolute obfuscation from China’s best physicians.

Undoubtedly the WHO’s mission to study the pandemic’s origins in China faced enormous pressure from Chinese scientists (who made up half the team) to conclude it wasn’t a lab accident. Mission Chief, Peter Ben Embarek, told a Danish television documentary, broadcast on 12 August, that Chinese scientists refused to discuss the lab leak scenario unless the final report dismissed any need for further investigation. Having haggled about it until 48 hours before they left China, Ben Embarek said, his Chinese counterpart eventually agreed to discuss the lab leak theory in the report “but only on condition we didn’t recommend any specific studies to further that hypothesis.” This is old-fashioned scientific gagging.

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The Danish scientist had cooperated with the documentary makers for months, and their footage of the China visit came partly from his mobile phone. The documentary also showed him expressing his worries in January about the Wuhan branch of the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, which is beside the food market that Chinese authorities blamed for the outbreak. This facility, independent of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was overlooked by WHO as a potential source of concern. But Embarek has since observed this Chinese CDC laboratory, was handling coronaviruses, “without potentially having the same level of expertise or safety,” and was not even part of their inspection.

China’s sensitivity and secrecy, Embarek is quoted as saying, “probably means there’s a human error behind such an event” which will never be admitted. The WHO team’s scientists had to be approved by China and accompanied by an equal number of Chinese scientists, under conditions China set before allowing their entry. The Chinese scientists had to approve the report before its release. But the swift dismissal of a lab leak drew widespread criticism, including from WHO’s director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who has since called the finding “premature.” In addition, raising further suspicion, a mysterious Swiss epidemiologist was widely quoted in Chinese media berating a US campaign to pressure WHO into falsely blaming China for the pandemic. The WHO and Swiss authorities have since called him “a fake invented by the Chinese media.”

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has condemned his African counterparts in their rush to emulate the west in locking South Africa out as Rwanda, Seychelles, Mauritius, Egypt and Angola and others swiftly closed their borders. Ramaphosa said he was “deeply disappointed” by the action, which he described as unjustified, and called for the bans to be urgently lifted. The result of the latest unilateral action by states has been to leave hundreds of thousands of South Africans in economic peril, cauterized international investment and cut off most of its foreign aid. WHO’s own Africa director Dr Matshidiso Moeti reported that travel bans that target Africa or any specific region are just, “an attack on global solidarity.” Dr Angelique Coetzee, the virologist who first spotted Omicron, initially described “extremely mild” symptoms in patients, but even with that encouraging news, the international community’s embargo has gone into over-drive.

The World Bank recently determined that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world — and the UN’s Human Development Index ranks its worsening income inequality. About 11 million South Africans live on less than \$55 per month. Indeed nearly 4 million South Africans are in a state of multi-dimensional poverty. So, when South Africa’s Minister of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) Naledi Pandor, blames the international community for “punishing” South Africa, she is “speaking the truth”. The WHO has repeatedly urged countries not to impose travel restrictions in a knee-jerk reaction. The WHO statement reads: “This latest round of travel bans is akin to punishing South Africa for its advanced genomic sequencing and the ability to detect new variants quicker. Excellent science should be applauded and not punished.” Supporting this caution, WHO Head of Emergencies Michael Ryan stressed the importance of waiting for more data. “We’ve seen in the past, the minute there’s any kind of variation and everyone is closing borders and restricting travel. It’s really important that we remain open, and stay focused,” Ryan said. To be fair, the WHO have also dispatched a helper team, but the flags of intergovernmental organisations do not go far when you are unemployed, have no customers or taxi fares or can fill no tourist hotel rooms.

Pandor said South Africa’s capacity to test and its ramped-up vaccination programme, backed up by its world class scientific community, “should give global partners confidence in their doctors, not embargo.” However, despite all the international promises, this is (alas) a plain case of international politics damaging South Africa’s health. One does not need million-dollar diagnostics to see the effects in the impoverished streets of Johannesburg. This is one of the clearest recent cases of the international community shooting the messenger. It may seem good international politics to pull up the drawbridge, but its economic effects are already being felt in one of the financially most unequal countries in the world. For the duration of the embargo, South Africa’s poor will only further suffer while international politicians selfishly persuade home electorates that they are keeping their citizens safe. To ordinary South Africans it must seem a high price to pay for global health.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.