



**Rural Doctor's Association of Southern Africa**

*Inspiring others to rural health*

**URGENT PRESS STATEMENT ON THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH STATEMENT OF 28 DECEMBER 2021 RECALLING THE CIRCULAR ON REVISED CONTACT TRACING, QUARANTINE AND ISOLATION PROTOCOLS**

The Rural Doctors Association of South Africa would like to express its extreme disappointment at the recent communication from the Department of Health, withdrawing its new, scientifically sound quarantine and self-isolation guidelines.

The old guidelines, that had barely changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, do not take into account the benefits of the high levels of vaccination amongst healthcare workers, nor the high levels of COVID immunity in the South African population (estimated at 80-90%), and have put enormous pressure on small, understaffed hospitals and clinics in rural areas. The new guidelines, though by no means perfect, were a massive step in the right direction.

We are grateful that the Omicron variant seems to be milder and has not resulted in a dramatic new wave of hospitalisations. However, many healthcare workers have come down with mild COVID symptoms and by far the biggest strain for us during this fourth wave has been trying to keep services going when healthcare workers have had to self-isolate, or needed to quarantine after close contact with a COVID case, usually a colleague.

The CDC has just allowed asymptomatic, COVID positive healthcare workers in the US to return to work after five days, as long as they are wearing an N95 mask. Yet in South Africa we are insisting that vaccinated, uninfected healthcare workers who are COVID contacts quarantine for a full 10 days. This is an untenable situation that has caused the unnecessary closure of rural health clinics, severe understaffing of rural hospital through the busy festive period and has put awful strain on the hardworking, committed healthcare workers who remain at their posts at the coalface, all for absolutely NO public health benefit.

The retraction of the new guidelines around quarantine and self-isolation without clear reasons or plan will have dire consequences and must be reversed immediately. Strong and clear leadership is required to protect our health care service delivery. Any further delay for the purposes of "consultation" will be measured in lives lost as pregnant mothers, malnourished babies and victims of violence are left unattended in rural hospital all over the country, whilst healthy healthcare workers are forced to quarantine at home.

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