



Montreal, Canada

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m2685

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2685>

Published: 03 July 2020

Covid-19: No large hidden outbreak in Africa but health worker shortage worsens

Owen Dyer

The World Health Organization does not believe that Africa harbours large numbers of undetected covid-19 infections, said its regional director Matshidiso Moeti, although “there is underestimation of cases.”

African countries had reported 434 442 cases and 10 662 deaths from covid-19 on 3 July, with 209 616 patients having recovered. Only about 4% of the world’s cases and 2% of global deaths from covid-19 have been recorded on the continent, following a strong early public health response from many African governments.

But cases have been spiking faster lately, particularly in South Africa, where the lockdown was strict and early but where international travellers arrive in greater numbers than other African countries.

Africa’s low volume of air travel made it the last continent where the virus took root, and the same poor road network which has long bedevilled public health and vaccination campaigns also seems to have frustrated the outbreak’s march into rural areas.

The disease has spread beyond the capital cities but rarely far beyond the reach of Africa’s many seasoned contact tracers, Moeti suggested.

One of the few African governments to downplay the threat of the virus was Burundi, whose president Pierre Nkurunziza said that Burundians would be spared the disease because they “put God first,” arguing that God had “cleared the coronavirus from Burundi’s skies.” On 8 June, Nkurunziza became the first head of state to die from the virus, aged 55.

South Africa accounts for a third of the continent’s reported cases, but it is Egypt that has seen the most deaths. Egypt’s death toll stood at 3120 on 3 July.

A model published in *BMJ Global Health* in late May predicted that the WHO Africa region could see 83 000 to 190 000 deaths in the first year of the pandemic.¹ That region does not include Egypt or most north African, Arabic speaking countries. It does include Algeria, which the model forecast would suffer the most deaths, followed by Nigeria and South Africa.

If low average age is Africa’s greatest advantage against covid-19, the scarcity of doctors and nurses is its greatest handicap. Many countries in central Africa have less than one doctor per 10 000 population and health workers face high infection risks as African governments are repeatedly outbid for personal protective equipment on the international market.

After South Africa, Nigeria has the most health worker infections in absolute terms, but more alarming trends are seen in neighbouring Niger, where health workers account for 19% of infections and there is one doctor per 20 000 population.

Nigerian doctors have gone on strike to protest safety standards, and reports suggest the country’s chronic medical brain drain to the north has worsened during the pandemic.

In Egypt, where at least 70 medical staff have died, doctors and journalists have been arrested for reporting poor hospital safety measures amid a government crackdown on discussion about the virus. “Enemies of the state are trying to question the state’s efforts and achievements,” tweeted President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.

¹ Cabore JW, Karamagi HC, Kipruto H, et al. The potential effects of widespread community transmission of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the World Health Organization African Region: a predictive model. *BMJ Glob Health* 2020;5. doi: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002647 pmid: 32451366

This article is made freely available for use in accordance with BMJ’s website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may use, download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose (including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.