

Figures for flu get sanitised

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Time for a good news pandemic story: the flu season in SA is over. But also, the flu season didn't happen – laboratories at our National Institute for Communicable Diseases, which normally test and confirm upwards of 1 000 cases each winter, have identified just one. This is not only true for SA. All Southern Hemisphere regions reporting their winter figures have been startled by the data: in July and August 2019, Australia confirmed 131 000 cases of flu; this year, in the same months there were 315.

Chile, Argentina and New Zealand are finding much the same: in New Zealand, GPs have not detected a single incidence of flu since June, while Auckland's hospitals haven't had a case admitted since April.

It seems that all the masking, handwashing, sneezing into elbows, social distancing, and consideration for others has had an impact not just on the spread of the coronavirus, but also on the transmission of flu, and, no doubt, colds, vomiting bugs, diarrhoea, and so forth. If it's contagious – viral or bacterial – it has been slowed down.

And flu has been stopped in its tracks.

But also, crucially, this is living proof of just how very contagious Covid-19 actually is, because despite global lockdowns and all the restrictions, the world still has over 31 million cases, and SA has had 660 000 confirmed.

Contrast that with then-and now flu figures, and the picture is thrown into stark relief.

So imagine just how devastating the pandemic would be if we weren't all doing our bit for the common good – wielding our hand sanitiser, wearing our masks, restricting our movements.

It's vital to recognise this truth, particularly because of the global rise in Covid-19 naysayers, in people who believe it's a hoax, that "they" are laughing at us behind their face masks, that "Big Pharma" is just trying to wring money out of us.

By the same token, global excess mortalities – projected annual deaths versus actual deaths – will likely not be as high as anticipated, not because the danger posed by Covid-19 has been overstated, but because our efforts to curb it have had a positive knockon effect on other diseases.

It's essential we remember this because a reckoning is coming, and such nuances will be masked, and heavily sanitised.