

# Second Covid-19 wave coming? No clarity, no information as Abdool Karim and the MAC go to ground

**news24**

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Health Minister Zweli Mkhize.  
GCIS

- It has been weeks since President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the country on the status of the Covid-19 epidemic and measures needed to keep transmission rates low.
  - A lack of transparency over what scientists appointed to advise the government are saying is fuelling concerns that health officials are continuing to place a stranglehold on data and information.
  - Official, reported data shows at least one province – the Eastern Cape – is in the grip of a "second wave".
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The country is in the dark over what advice the new ministerial advisory committee (MAC), suddenly appointed by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize in September, has offered the government, while its chairperson, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, is also out of sight.

This amid fears that South Africa could be facing a resurgence of Covid-19 in the coming months and concern in medical and epidemiological circles that an uptick in infections in the Eastern Cape recently could increase pressure on a stretched health system in the province.

The previous MAC, with Abdool Karim at the forefront, was intimately involved in the government's response. The new MAC, however, does not seem to be as engaged as their predecessors.

In addition, it is unclear if the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC), a subcommittee of Cabinet, is still focused on the pandemic.

The NCCC is expected to meet this week, after which Ramaphosa is expected to address the country. But it is not clear when the group last met.

News24 could last week not access one single new advisory since Mkhize suddenly cleaned out the MAC which had been advising him and the government on the health and epidemiological response to the pandemic.

Many members of the previous MAC had been critical of the government's response, while the health department initially did not want to release any of the advisories forwarded to the minister.

A Promotion of Access to Information Act request filed by News24 in July forced the ministry to publish the advisories.

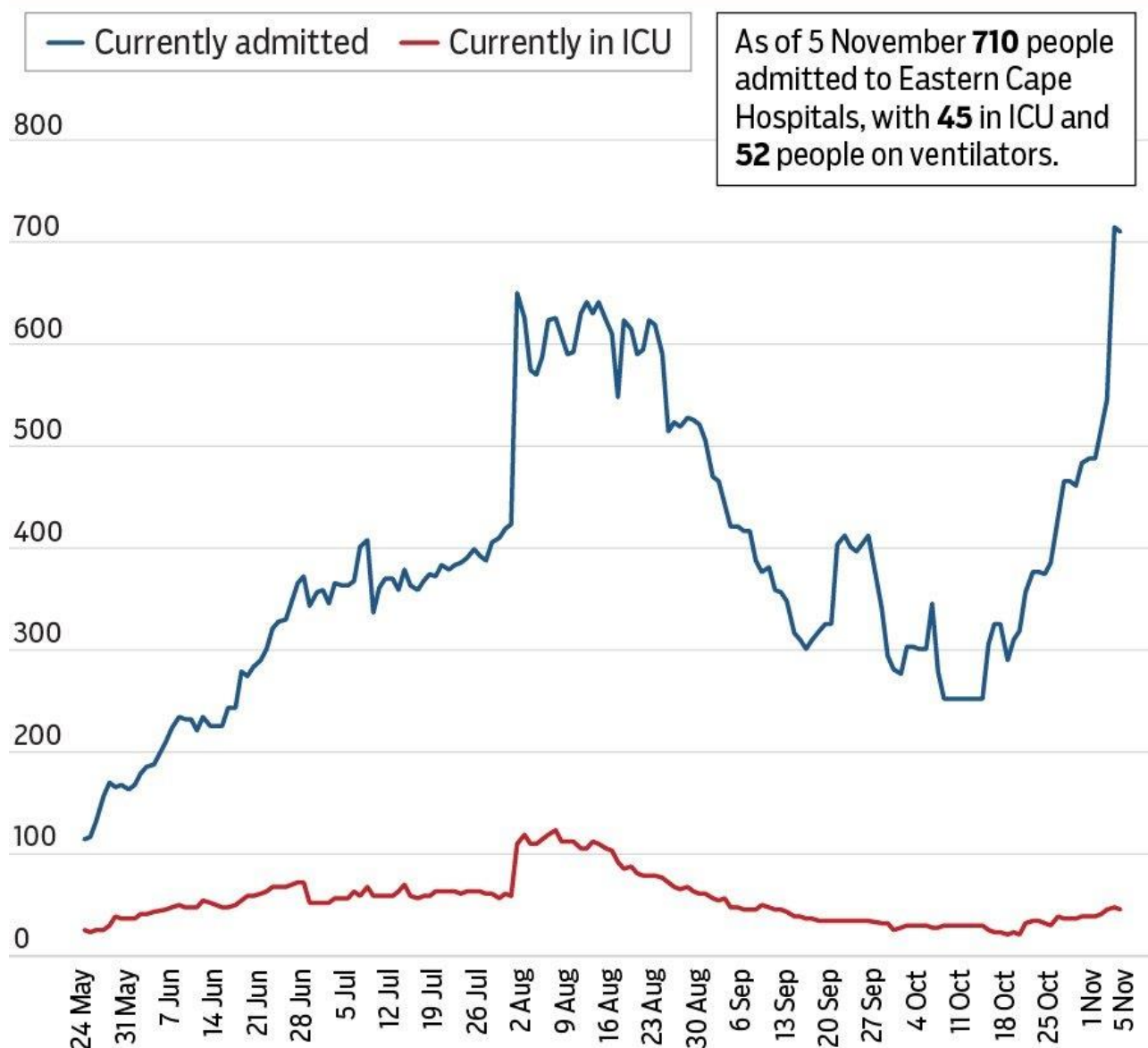
After the [previous MAC's disbandment](#), speculation was rife that the critical stance many members of the MAC took could have played a role in their demise.

Despite numerous attempts to reach Abdool Karim, News24 was unable to get access to him. The health department could not reply to questions sent to it last Thursday, while Minister in the Presidency Jackson Mthembu did not reply, saying the president would address the business of the NCCC next week.

It appears health officials are maintaining a stranglehold on detailed Covid-19 data and information. As warnings and early signs of a resurgence in cases grow in urgency, details of the government's response plan have dwindled.

In at least one province, the Eastern Cape, a resurgence in cases and hospital admissions is already under way, with no clear communication from health officials on what is being done.

## Hospital admissions in the Eastern Cape as of 5 September



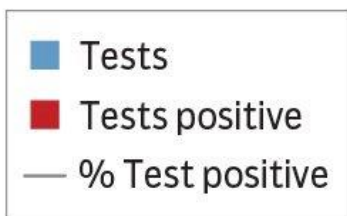
Source: NICD Daily Hospitalisation Reports

Graphic: RUDI LOUW

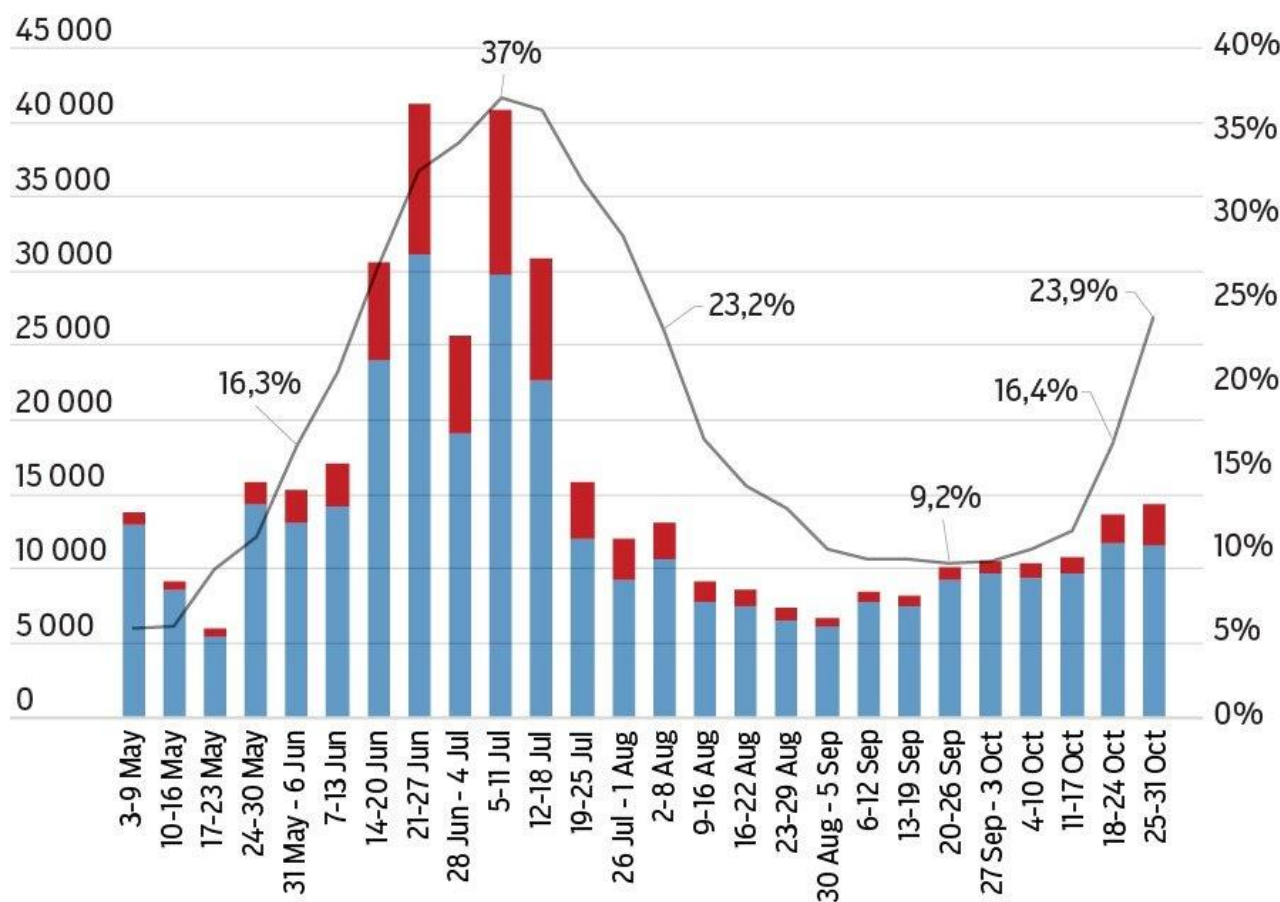
Testing positivity rates for the final week of October in the province increased by 7.5% to 23.9%, while roughly the same number of tests were conducted. Hospital admissions increased by 225 between 30 October to 5 September, according to reports by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD).

These sharp increases in key metrics used to monitor the spread of Covid-19 are worrying signs of a "second wave" being under way already.

# Eastern Cape weekly tests and % of tests positive for Covid-19

The Eastern Cape has reported the highest percentage of tests returning positive in the country for the week of 25-31 October. **23.9%**



Source: NICD Weekly Testing Summaries

Graphic: RUDI LOUW

Despite this, it has been weeks since Ramaphosa or Mkhize addressed the country with any specific details over the ongoing strategy to keep transmission levels low.

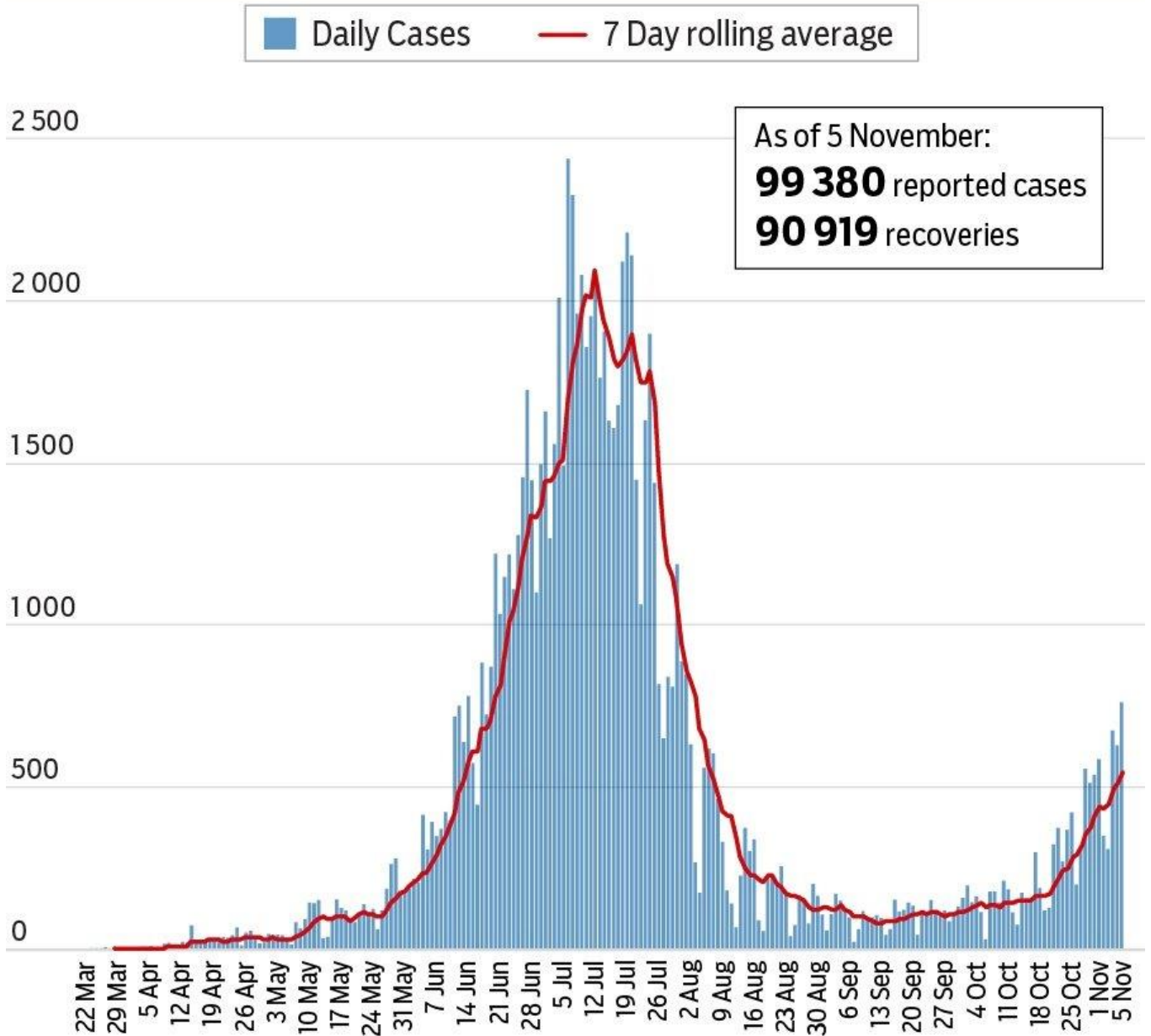
Additionally:

- It is unclear if the NCCC is still meeting regularly, while it is expected to meet this week;
- It has been three months since the health department released an advisory from the newly appointed MAC and it is unclear what scientific advice is being given to, and has been requested, by the government;
- Data reporting remains unsatisfactory, with a continued lack of clarity over time delays around reporting times, particularly with deaths;
- Eight months into the local epidemic, testing data for provinces is not reported by the health department and continued requests to get access to this and other data, including a Promotion of Access to Information Act request, have gone ignored;
- Updated modelling and projections have not been made public since June;
- It has been months since the government held a briefing in conjunction with scientists to inform the public what advice is being given to the government.

Nationally, new cases are being reported at a rate of roughly 1 500 to 2 000 new cases a day on average, representing consistent case growth that has remained stable for weeks.

The reported data does not show a noticeable upward trend in case increases, despite the resurgence in the Eastern Cape, where natural deaths have also started creeping upward again, according to the latest weekly mortality report by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC).

# Daily cases in the Eastern Cape (7-Day Moving Average)



Source: NDOH Daily Report

Graphic: RUDI LOUW

But at least three scientists interviewed by News24 this week warned that complacency could see cases and hospital admissions increasing quickly, particularly with the increased contact between family members expected over the festive season.

News24 previously reported that the health department was refusing to acknowledge, in light of more than 45 000 excess natural deaths found by the SAMRC and University of Cape Town researchers, that [the official death toll from Covid-19 may be understated](#).

In a briefing with the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Friday, Mkhize urged provinces to report all deaths using WHO protocols to avoid "confusing and concerning perceptions" that there is under-reporting.

Mkhize, whose comments were based on the SAMRC findings on excess deaths, also acknowledged that there exists uncertainty about the exact number of Covid-19 deaths – a shift in public comments by health officials over the issue.

He urged provinces to be guided by WHO protocols in its reporting, adding this would prevent a "backlog as we have seen in the Eastern Cape".

In stressing the importance of information and data during the pandemic to manage health decisions, Mkhize said a "surge" is evident in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng, with KwaZulu-Natal following suit.

Western Cape premier Alan Winde has previously denied that Covid-19 cases are on the increase.

### **Complacency in the public**

While community Covid-19 infections continue, albeit at a slower pace than the first wave the country experienced in July and August, experts agree that South Africans have seemingly become complacent.

Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) - mask wearing, hand washing and physical distancing - have seemingly become a thing of the not-to-distant past for much of the public, experts say.

With the establishment of the new MAC – after the previous MAC was summarily disbanded - and amid this apparent lapse in personal prevention measures, Mkhize appointed a committee of experts to advise him on behavioural change – arguably one of the most powerful weapons against the virus.

Professor Jeffrey Mphahlele, who is vice-president of the SAMRC as well as a member of the new MAC on Covid-19 vaccines, said the lapse in NPI practices surprisingly has not led to a severe rise in cases, which he labelled an "enigma".

He added that the anticipated second wave will most likely happen in the new year when there could be a "steady increase in the number of new infections".

"This is because the festive season will just provide fertile ground for increased community spread of the virus, and because no one can predict with 100% certainty, we can't tell you whether that will really lead to a situation that will get out of control immediately or whether the number of new infections will keep on increasing steadily, and maybe during the winter season then the situation gets out of control like we see in Europe."

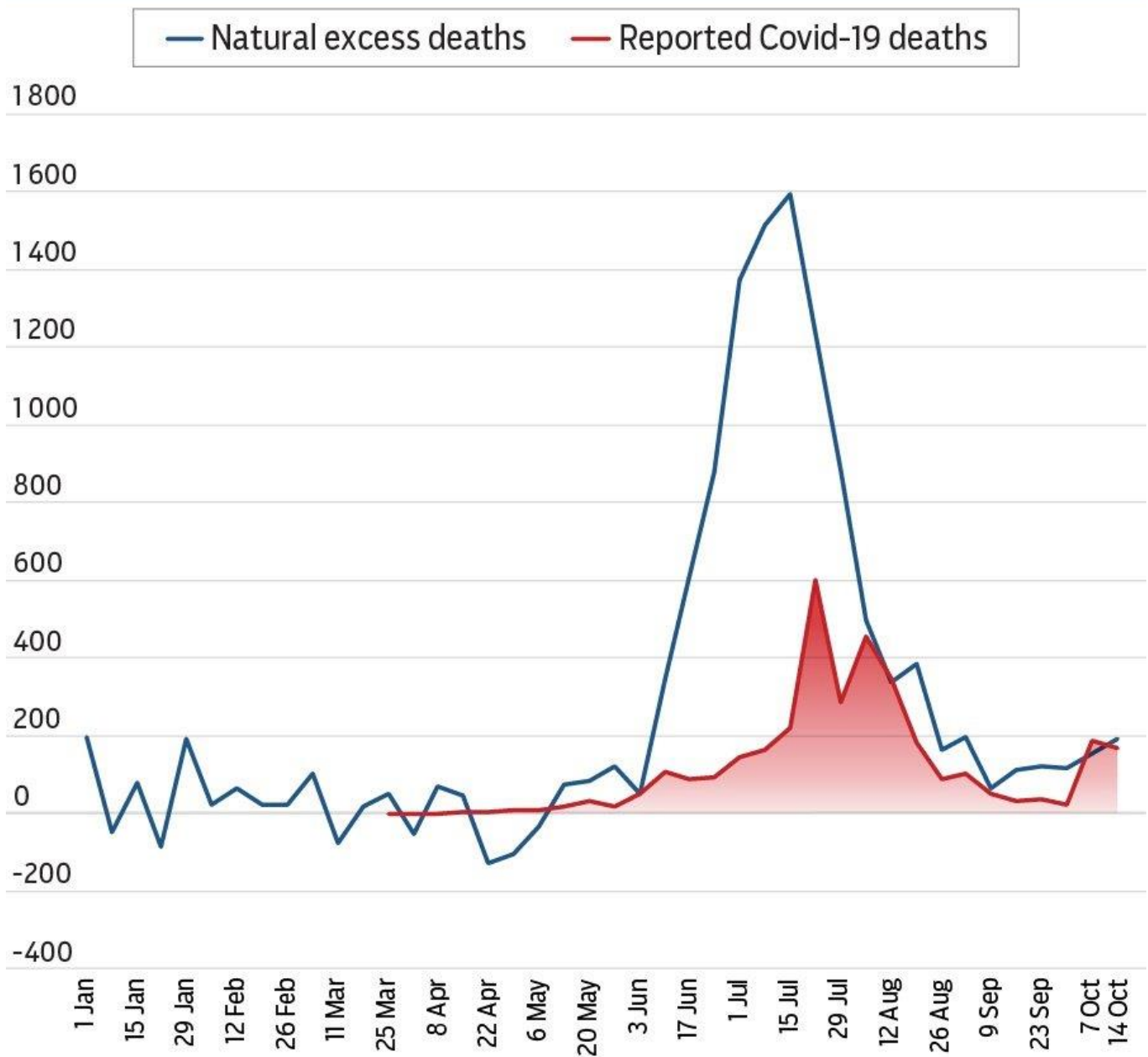
Professor of vaccinology at the University of the Witwatersrand and former member of the MAC, Shabir Madhi, said South Africa was beginning to see a slight resurgence in infections because the percentage of the population initially infected with the virus, while high, was not high enough for sustained interruption in the chain of transmission.

"So, as you take one of the tools away, which is the NPIs, as people become more complacent about the use of those NPIs, then we expect a resurgence, because there still is 60% or 70% of the population still susceptible to being infected," Madhi explained.

He added that the latest MRC report on excess mortality "tells the tale on its own", showing an increase in Gauteng, Free State, Mpumalanga, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape.



# Eastern Cape excess deaths vs reported Covid-19 deaths



Source: SAMRC Weekly Excess Deaths Report

Graphic: RUDI LOUW