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Concern over govt Covid count

ISSUES: HEALTH DEPT, INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICABLE DISEASES ARE SOLE SOURCE

➔ **Experts say accuracy is critical and public should get raw data – also for testing.**

Sipho Mabena

The government's Covid-19 statistics are being questioned, with experts saying it is problematic that the public relies on government for data.

There is increasing concern about the accuracy of Covid-19 statistical data, particularly because there is apparently no transparency on how the health department and the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) arrives at the numbers given to the public.

On Monday, the NICD acknowledged that testing data had not been made public.

On Tuesday, 2 295 new cases were reported by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize, bringing the country's official confirmed total to 792 299.

Another 109 deaths were also reported, making the official death toll linked to the coronavirus 21 644.

Even though Covid-19 cases are supposedly increasing and the latest figures indicate a huge spike, experts are asking whether the figures are realistic, considering that government is the sole keeper of the numbers.

Experts contend that accuracy in Covid-19 testing numbers is critical and that government should rather give raw data to the public.

"I do agree that transparency is important and the reasons for holding back the testing numbers should be disclosed," Dr Glenda Davison, associate professor and head of the biomedical sciences department at Cape Peninsula



PAY UP, SAA

National Union of Mineworkers of SA and SA Cabin Crew Association members picket outside SAA Airways Park in Johannesburg yesterday demanding workers be paid salaries for the past eight months. The Treasury allocated funds to the airline business rescue plan and restructuring. Picture: Nigel Sibanda

University of Technology in Cape Town, said.

She said the cumulative total number of cases and new cases was most likely far lower than the true value and this was mainly due to the fact that many people get infected with Covid-19 and do not get tested.

"I think this is a phenomenon all over the world," she said.

Davison explained that common data was that the number of hospitalisations and deaths are probably a better reflection of

the spread and severity of the virus. "These have also gone up and so, particularly in the Eastern and Western Cape, we are facing a upsurge of infections," she said.

Davison said It was concerning that the testing data was not being released, saying this was important to be able to calculate the positivity rate, how many positive cases are detected for every 100 tests.

"It would be very difficult for government to release the raw

data as testing is being done in many different laboratories, including both the public and private sector. I can only guess that some laboratories have not reported the total number of tests they have processed."

Dr Shakira Choonara, an independent public health practitioner, said there had been a number of data gaps worldwide when it comes to Covid-19, and the World Health Organisation had cautioned about different mortality calculations being used.

"For now, as far as I know, we have to look to department of health and NICD data as the main source on the current pan-

demical and we assume it is reliable. Although, there is no harm in stakeholders providing more data versus less, which could help the public understand but also strengthen the response on all fronts, there is a lot we do not know and are heavily reliant on (government) releases which makes accountability difficult," she said.

Choonara added that, for example, Mkhize has on a daily basis been providing updated statistics on Twitter, but publicly citizens have had to rely on general information, instead of detailed and raw data.

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Reasons for withholding test numbers should be disclosed