Gauteng Covid-19 data inaccuracies emphasise lack of accurate accounting for coronavirus outbreak

news24

Kyle Cowan

(Getty Images)

- **After a 64-day lull in reported Covid-19 cases and recoveries, Gauteng has reported more than 9 700 recoveries.**
- **Two days later, the province stopped publicly reporting Covid-19 data.**
- **Nearly a month later, it is now clear the impact of this has been to render inaccurate Covid-19 data reported by the national Department of Health.**

An anomaly in the official Covid-19 data reported by the national Department of Health for Gauteng has emphasised concerns over the overall reliability of official coronavirus case information reported by the government.

Since 11 November, the number of "active cases" in the province equalled and then dipped below the total number of people hospitalised with Covid-19 - an improbability that can only point to data inaccuracies.

The active cases metric, while unreliable as an outright indicator of the local epidemic due to time delays in the reporting of deaths, cases and recoveries and an inconsistent definition of recoveries is a crude measurement of the number of people who have Covid-19 and have yet to recover or die.

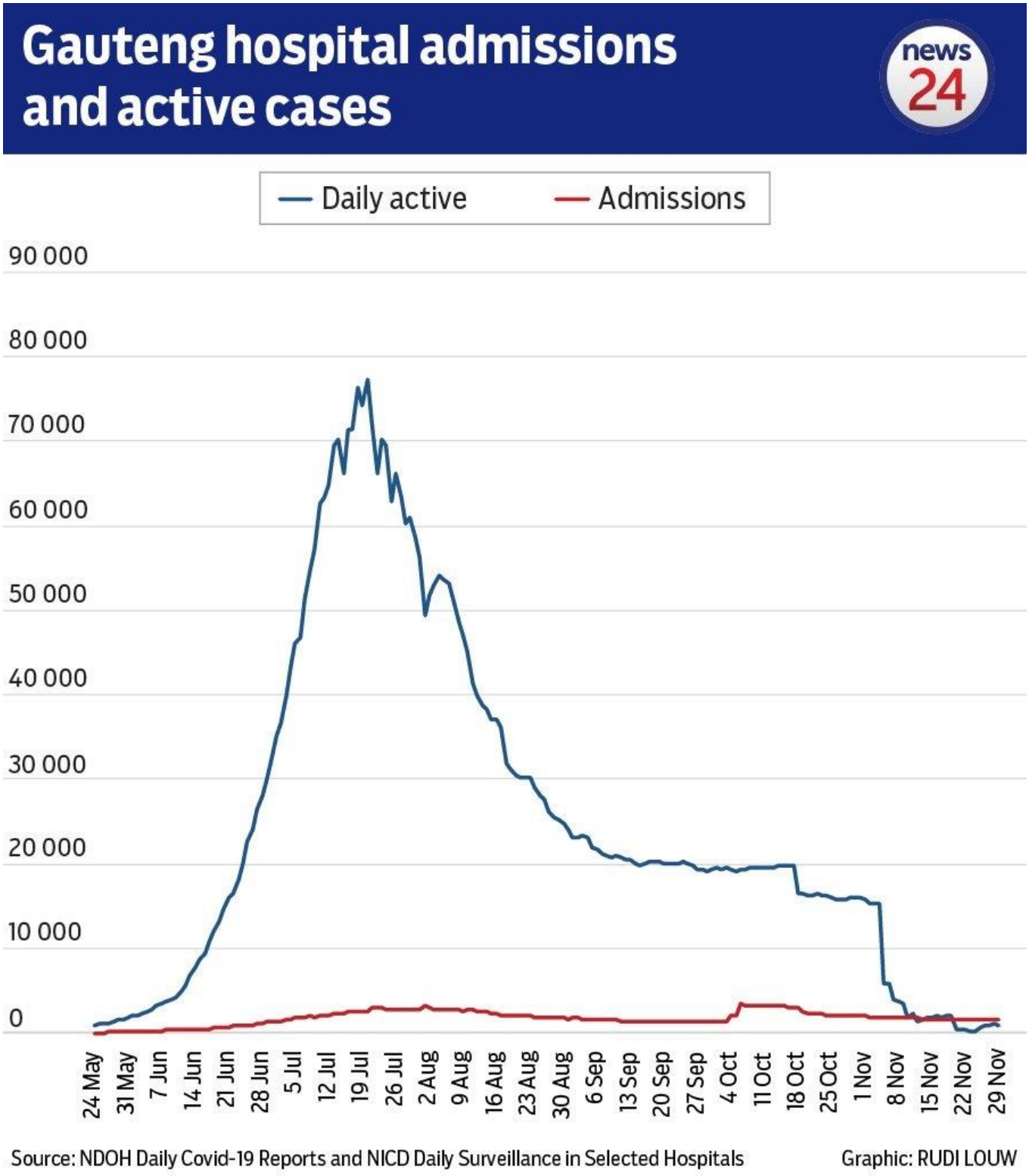
It is therefore impossible for the number of active cases - reached by deducting the number of reported deaths and the number of reported recoveries from the number of confirmed cases - to be below hospital admission numbers, as those persons admitted to hospital each constitute one active case.

On 7 November, the Gauteng Department of Health announced it was undertaking a "data harmonisation" process as part of routine audits conducted on Covid-19 data. By 30 November, that process had not been completed and the department had not publicly reported daily data since 7 November.

The department was asked this week to address these concerns and clarify whether it had identified material inaccuracies in the data reported so far, but it refused to answer detailed questions, referring instead to its 7 November statement announcing the harmonisation process.

Furthermore, on 5 November - two days before the department announced the data harmonisation process - it reported 9 747 recoveries, the largest single-day number of recoveries reported by Gauteng for 64 days.

When plotted as a line graph, the number of active cases per day for Gauteng is clearly seen to dip on 11 November and then continue to drop below the number of hospital admissions in the following days.

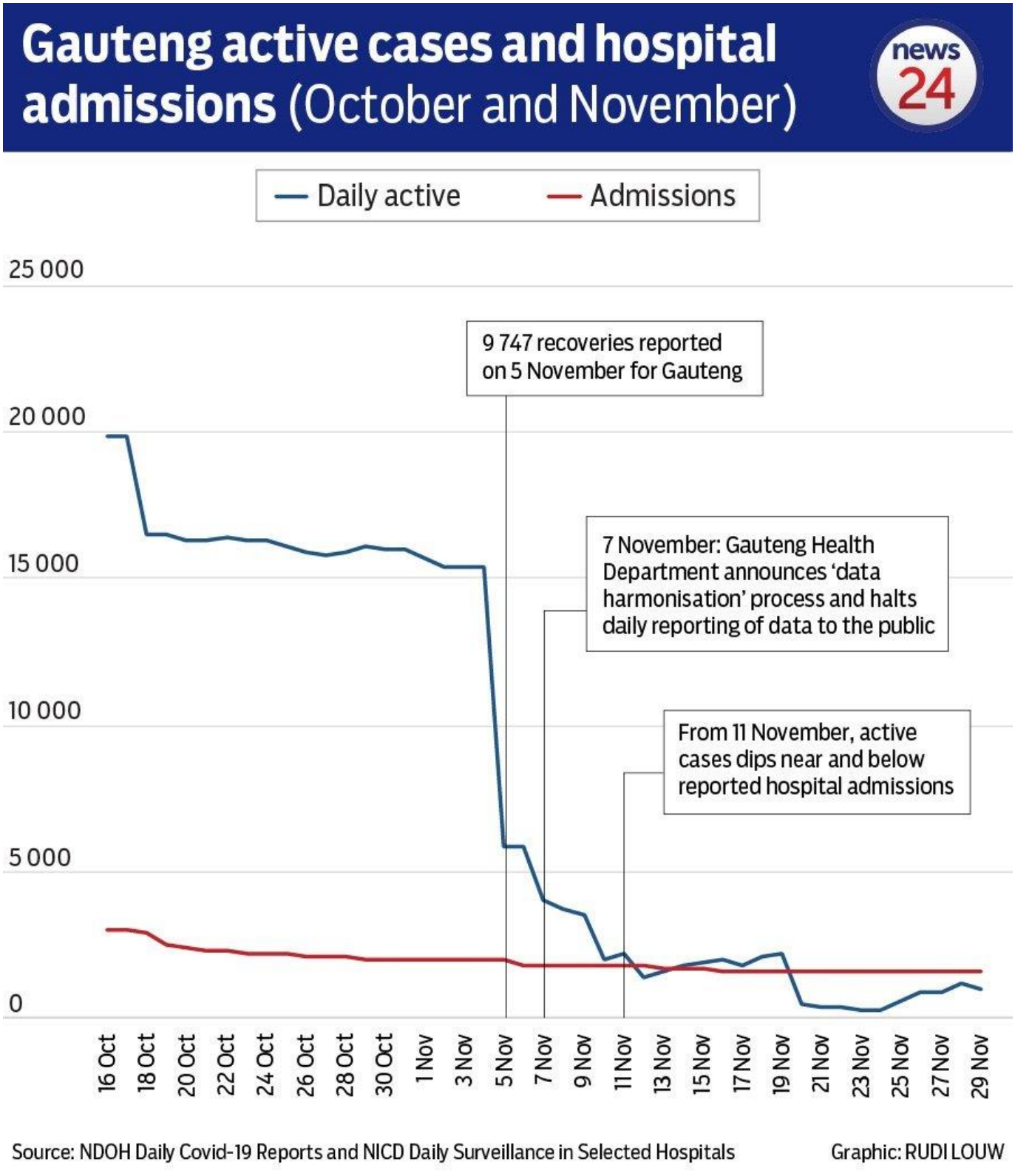


In general, a person is considered clinically recovered from Covid-19 anywhere between 10 and 14 days after a positive test providing no symptoms are present after that time period.

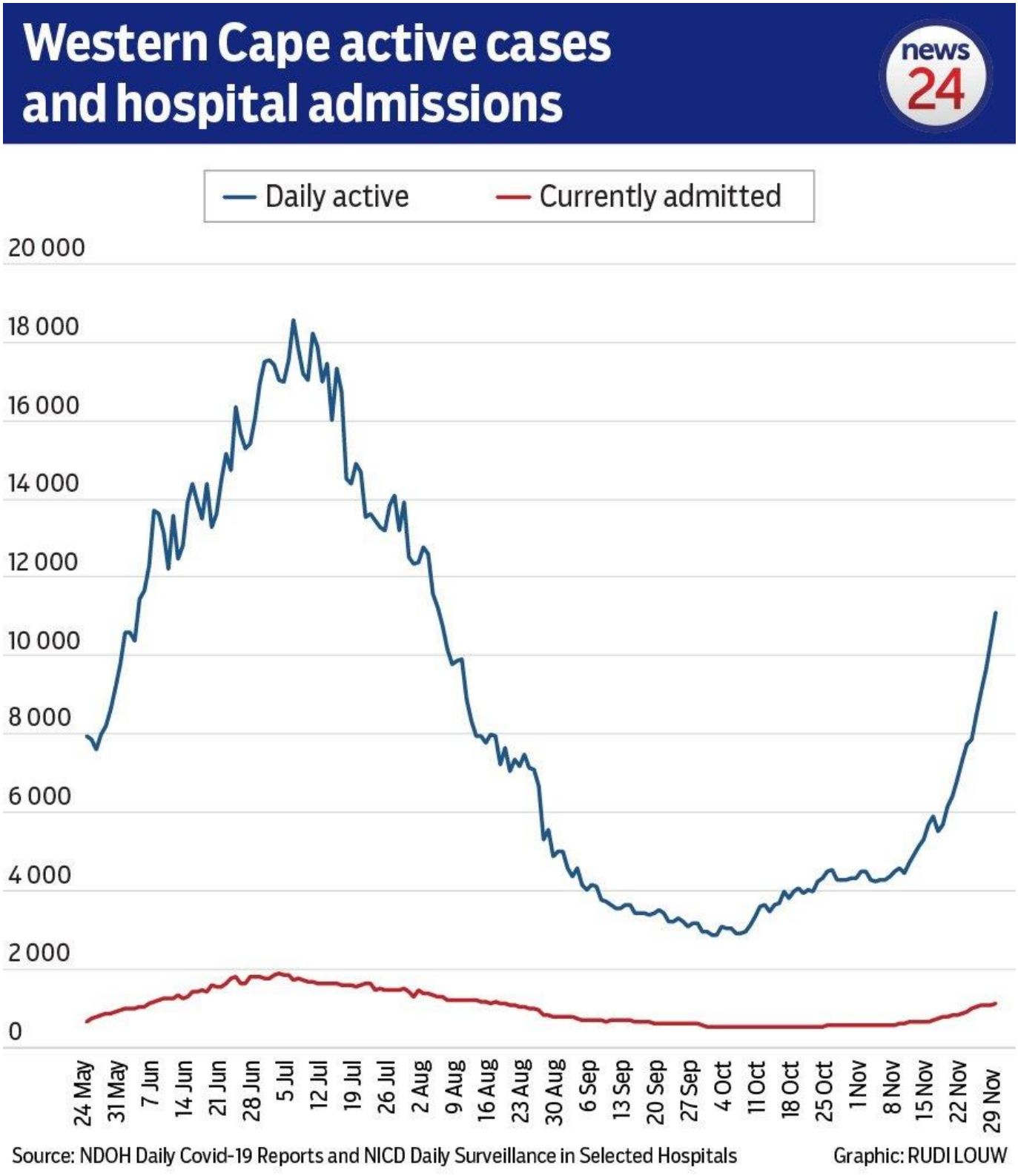
There was no corresponding surge in the weeks prior to the reporting of such a large number of recoveries on 5 November by the department.

Compounding the data inaccuracies is that not all hospitals in Gauteng were reporting data to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, which makes it even more improbable that the number of active cases should reach below hospital admissions.

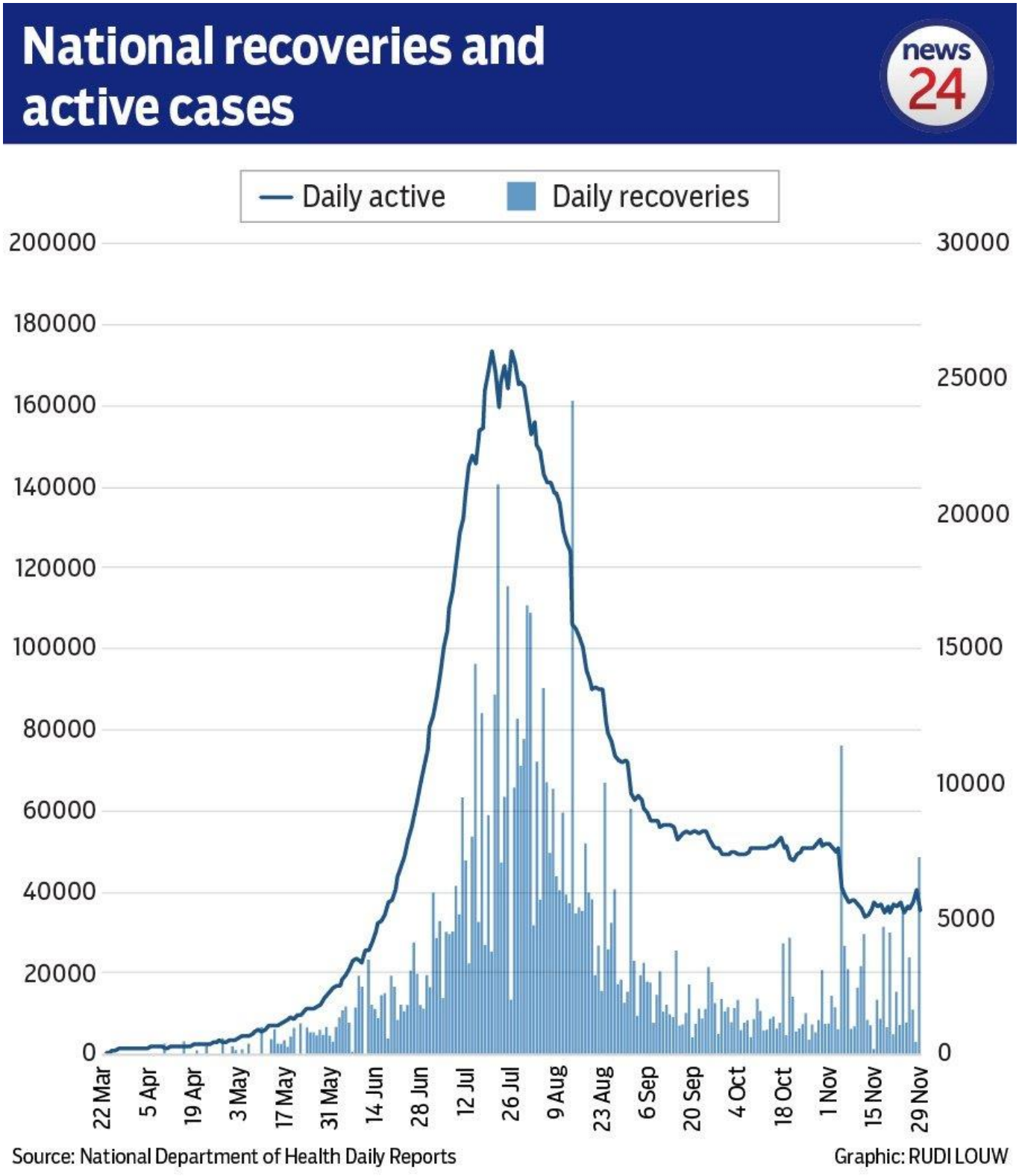
A closer look at October and November shows the effect this large number of recoveries had on official Covid-19 information:



Comparatively, mapping the same information - active cases and daily hospital admissions for the Western Cape shows clearly the number of active cases does not drop below the number of reported hospital admissions for the province at any time.



The national health department relies on provincial health officials to report Covid-19 data daily. Correspondingly, the inaccuracies in reported Gauteng data are evident from the daily reports by the national department.



News24 has previously reported that concern existed over the accuracy of reported Covid-19 data as a result of the strong correlation between excess natural deaths and surges of coronavirus cases which was evidence of an underreporting of the official death toll from Covid-19.

The national health department also does not report deaths by date of occurrence, does not report cases by date of positive test and does not report to the public on the number of people hospitalised in various provinces.

This causes an unknown time delay between the data of a person being testing positive, being admitted to hospital or dying before it is known to the public. Estimates are that reported Covid-19 cases are delayed by between five and 10 days, resulting in the public being in the dark over the spread of the virus and outbreaks are not publicly known until they are well underway.

In July, News24 filed a Promotion of Access to Information Act request seeking access to detailed Covid-19 data from the national Department of Health.

An internal appeal was filed 30 days later.