

# NICD PULSE



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

Division of the National Health Laboratory Service

## LEADING A UNITED NICD AMID A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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# Message From The Interim Executive Director

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### Dear colleagues

By now you will all know that the NAPHISA Bill was passed into law in August 2020. This has been years in the making and signals the start of a new and exciting phase for the NICD and for public health in South Africa. The COVID-19 outbreak has clearly highlighted why we need a single body to deal comprehensively with public health matters. The process of constituting NAPHISA is likely to take a few years as much needs to be accomplished including the unified transition of all NICD staff, programs and assets to the new organisation.

This will also be my last newsletter as the Director of the NICD. It has been a thoroughly rewarding 3 years and I want to thank all the staff for their support in keeping the NICD at the forefront of infectious disease outbreak response, surveillance and research. My interim term started with Listeria and ended with COVID-19 with many other challenges in-between. While the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, I have full confidence that the NICD teams will continue to lead the way. The NICD is a very resilient organisation with highly committed professional, administrative and support staff capable of rising to the many challenges it faces.

COVID-19 has also presented opportunities and highlighted the benefits of long-standing and adaptable disease surveillance programs. These core NICD programs have provided vital information on the epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2 but also established that we didn't have a flu season this year! The spatial mapping and disease modelling expertise at the NICD were heavily relied upon to advance the national response. New surveillance programs were started, including DATCOV to capture COVID-19 hospital admissions and deaths, as well as adaption of laboratory methods to detect SARS-CoV-2 in waste water for environmental surveillance. A number of innovative research projects were also initiated and it was particularly heartening to see how quickly staff responded to funding opportunities and

brought in much needed additional resources. We also formed new working groups, one on Serology and another on Sequencing that included people from the different Centres in order to harness our collective expertise to tackle this outbreak.

A major function of the NICD is to disseminate technical information including data. Our daily and weekly COVID-19 reports remain an essential source of information to the National Department of Health, other healthcare professionals as well as the public. The NICD Public Health Surveillance Bulletin produced special COVID-19 editions to enable rapid dissemination of important epidemiological information through our networks. The Scientific and Epidemiology Forums adapted to an on-line platform and we had weekly meetings that included national and international speakers, never before possible at the NICD. Our website is a reliable source of technical information which continues to evolve including displaying data through interactive dashboards. Please make a habit of checking our website regularly and directing others to it.

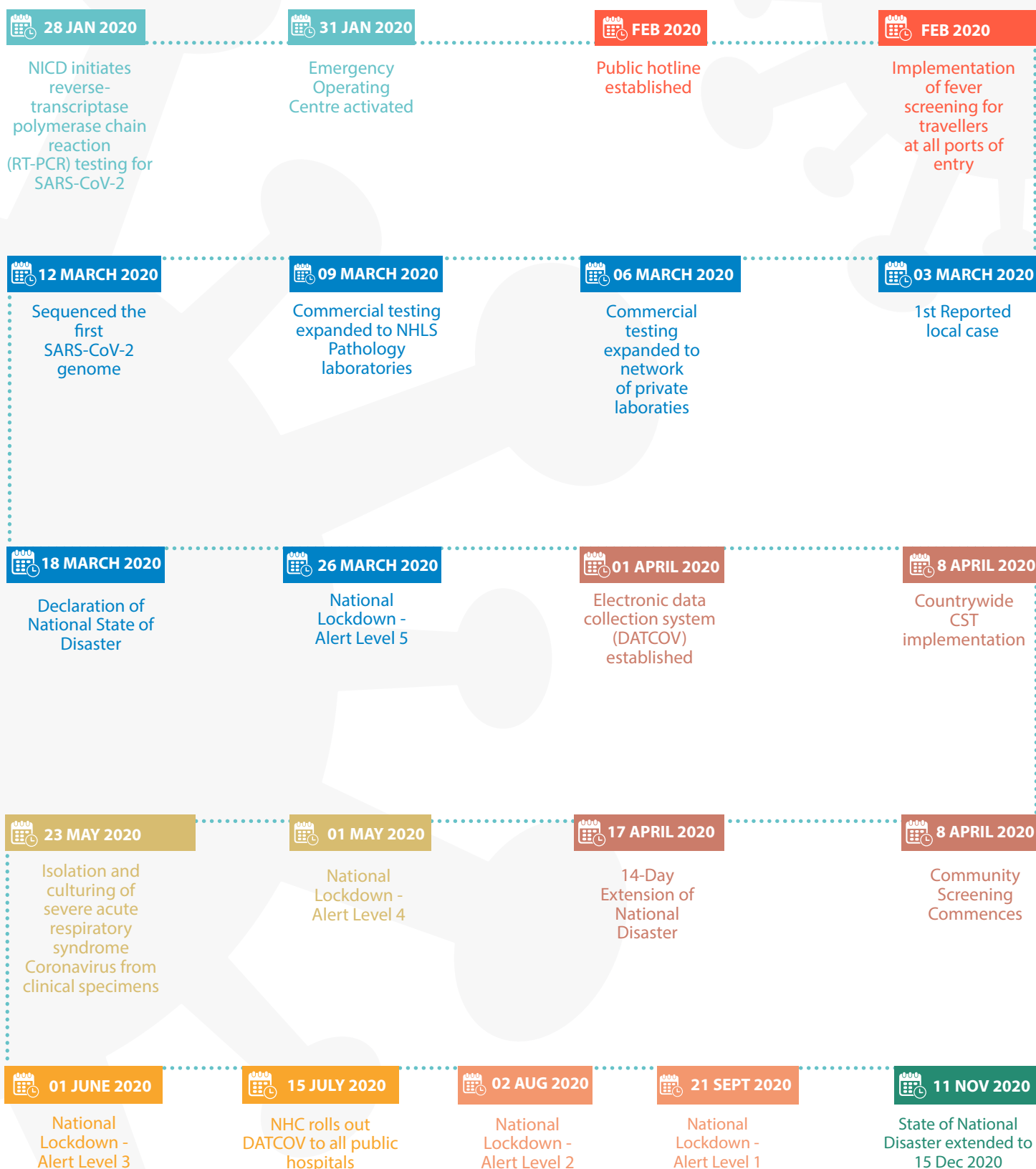
In this edition of the newsletter there are some personal accounts of how COVID-19 impacted staff at the NICD. It has been a very tough time but I am pleased to say that we managed to retain all staff and also accommodate our vulnerable employees. I would like to thank staff for the professional and sensitive handling of COVID-19 cases on campus. We say goodbye to the face of the NICD, our long-term receptionist Lindy Rakau. We will miss her welcoming smile at the entrance to the PRF building.

COVID-19 fatigue has set in and I hope that most of you get a well-deserved break. Unfortunately COVID-19 is still with us and so I would like to extend a special thanks to staff who will be working during this time and those who are taking shorter holidays to ensure that everyone gets a break. I encourage you all to continue to remain vigilant in the fight against COVID-19, both personally and professionally and I truly wish that the New Year brings some normality back to all of our lives.

With very best wishes, **Lynn**

# NICD COVID-19 Timeline

The global pandemic of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first reported on 31 December 2019 by the World Health Organization, following a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, China. Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has subsequently been identified as the causative virus of COVID-19. The following timeline depicts crucial dates in the detection, surveillance and management of the disease in South Africa, and the vitally important role the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has, and continues, to play.



# The COVID-19 Reality Check

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary describes "change" as the act or result of something becoming different, or the process of replacing something with something new. Change can go unnoticed, or it can affect life as we know it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) have demonstrated extreme resilience in unprecedented times. The Communications Unit reached out to a few employees to understand how they have dealt with change and how they have maintained a healthy work/life balance.



Occupational Health Nurse Manager, **Sr Ida Jordaan** was excitedly preparing (for the past 2 years) to compete in a Volleyball Masters Tournament, which would have taken place in Brazil. Enter COVID-19 and her plans changed completely. "Although I was disappointed about the tournament,

it was an exciting time to be part of such a dynamic organisation, who I feel are pioneering the medical research frontline," she said.

Gradually Sr Ida's daily duties were being sabotaged and overtaken by COVID-19, and as her workload increased, she had to learn to adapt to her new work environment. About behavioural changes, Sr Ida admitted that she was secretly delighted that she had a valid excuse to avoid traditional greetings which, depending on the person, could be awkward at times. When asked about how she let off steam, she talked about her passion for playing volleyball and that she rediscovered the tranquility of her garden: "I am now feeding birds and earthworms, and no, not one to the other."

“ It was an exciting time to be part of such a dynamic organisation, who I feel are pioneering the medical research frontline - Jordaan ”



**Nevashan Govender**, Emergency Operating Centre Operations Manager, said that for him COVID-19 started nearly a year ago: "In December 2019, when everybody was celebrating the coming New Year, I had my eye fixed firmly on news coming out of China." Govender had a gut feeling and knew that the coming months would not be easy – and he was spot on. As the local outbreak progressed, Govender's younger brother was diagnosed with the virus which resulted in their family going into quarantine. His father was also hospitalised for pneumonia. "The pressure was arduous, and despite personal tribulations, I had to keep my head in the game. I also heavily relied on my team, who offered me the necessary support", he said. The pandemic caused a lot of societal anxiety and uncertainty, but Govender managed to find solace in a coping mechanism he had adopted from a young age, namely baking. "When I get stressed out, I resort to baking, something I started doing from age 12. I find it calming and love baking Oreo cheesecake, carrot cake and Bar-One chocolate cake."

When asked what he has learnt from COVID-19, he sheepishly remarked that "as much as I would love to be an outbreak superhero, I acknowledge that I can do anything, but I am only human and can therefore not do everything."





Enthusiastic Field Epidemiologist, **Mzimasi Neti**, says he completed a Field Epidemiologist Training Program in December last year, and shortly thereafter was assigned to facilitate COVID-19 research in the Eastern Cape. "This gave me an opportunity to not only refine my work skills, but also develop new skills, including data management and analytics, research and interpersonal skills", he said. With the ban of intra-provincial travel during lockdown, Neti was unable to visit his mother: "This was one of the toughest challenges I had to face, but when I could eventually visit her after 7 months I was overcome with pure joy and elation." Neti reached a personal milestone during the pandemic and learned to cook. "Now I prepare healthy foods and have managed to save so much money," he proudly quipped.



The Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis's (CRDM), **Dr Mignon du Plessis** said that her professional life was heavily impacted by COVID-19 and that she had to "step up". "I have never worked so hard or under so much pressure in my 25-year career," she said. Reflecting back on the earlier pandemic days, she added that it has been a privilege to work with such amazing colleagues, including volunteers from other Centres. "We had to pull together as a team and approach the pandemic with innovative flair, including transforming our laboratory into a 24/7 diagnostic workspace. We had to adapt at a moment's notice as the pandemic evolved and new information came to light. It has been a tremendously intense and grueling period, with minimal room for error and almost insurmountable challenges, but we have laughed and cried together, and came out stronger and more resilient on the other side." When asked about her coping mechanisms, she admitted that exercising was her saving grace. "I was grateful to be able to run on our beautiful campus after work and also came to appreciate my home and garden so much more. I have renewed appreciation for the simpler things in life," Dr Du Plessis concluded.



**Lactatia Motsuku**, Epidemiologist at the National Cancer Registry, shared that pre-pandemic she was focused on getting her life back on track after a few personal setbacks. "I finally found a happy medium juggling my social, psychological, physical and spiritual life, but everything came to a screeching halt." Motsuku vividly recalls the phone call she received from her supervisor in March 2020, while she was still on leave, where she was asked to report to the Emergency Operating Centre (EOC) to assist with the COVID-19 outbreak response. "I was excited to take on the role and looked forward to investigating outbreaks again, but little did I know that this outbreak was unlike any previous outbreaks I had dealt with." For Motsuku the pandemic was the start of 24/7 work weeks, early

mornings and late nights that would challenge her overall wellbeing. "I missed weekends and holidays, and didn't have time for friends or family. I gained weight and became best buddies with my three computer screens."

When asked how she managed to regain some sort of balance in her personal life, Motsuku said that regular meditation and exercise was very beneficial and helped her cope with the demanding work conditions. "I also had to transform my home into a better working space for myself and my children to ensure that they could complete their school work." The pandemic provided a platform for self-reflection, and when asked what she learned, Motsuku says: "I have learnt that time is what you make of it and I've learnt to be more grateful. I now cherish everyday greetings and seemingly insignificant moments in life."

**“ Regular meditation and exercise was very beneficial and helped me cope with the demanding work conditions - Motsuku ”**

What we can take from 2020 is that, whether forced or natural, change is an inevitable part of life. And as a global community, COVID-19 has forced us to prioritise what's important. So take a moment to smell the flowers and let's not lose sight of what matters and those who matter the most.

## Women Leading The Fight Against COVID-19

In celebration of Women's Month in August this year, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) paid tribute to all women at the institute by recognising their contribution and commitment to public health, and their role in the critical fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of the commemoration, the Communications Unit zoomed into the involvement of some of the women at the NICD who have contributed tremendously to the fight against COVID-19. These women are pioneers, what the Communications Unit termed "Shepioneers", in their own right and are paving the way for young women who want to take up space in the public health landscape.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit our shores, **Dr Jinal Bhiman**, a Principal Medical Scientist at the Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis, was part of the team that developed the diagnostic test for COVID-19, which has now been rolled out to laboratories across the country. Dr Bhiman encouraged young women to join the science fraternity, despite its many challenges, as it is very fulfilling and rewarding to have a positive impact on public health.

With cases slowly increasing, testing became a crucial part of infection control and Medical Technologist, **Noluthando Duma**, performed the critical tasks of conducting the COVID-19 assays and disseminating the results to healthcare professionals. According to Duma, the current pandemic has emphasised the value of Medical Technologists as they play a vital role in disease diagnosis, which allows for the correct treatment to be administered.

As the country was put under lockdown, many individuals at the NICD continued to go to work and risked their lives to provide services to the country at large. Human Resources



Manager, **Azia Nxumalo** learnt very quickly that in the era of COVID-19, it was no longer business as usual. New protocols and processes had to be rapidly developed, often with limited guidance, and promptly implemented to allow the essential work of the NICD to continue, while ensuring the safety of its staff.

Not only was the safety of the NICD staff important but the safety of the public at large. Communication was key in educating healthcare workers, policymakers and the public about COVID-19. When people are informed, panic and fear are put at bay and behavioural change takes place. Senior Communications Manager, **Sinenhlanhla Jimoh**, has been leading the risk communication and behavioural change communication response to COVID-19. She firmly believes that human behaviour greatly influences the spread of disease and that it is important that Communication Science is seen as a strategic imperative and not an afterthought to positively affect change in behaviours.

But what happens when people are in panic mode and need answers? They need to be heard, which resulted in the Emergency Response Unit kicking into gear. As one of the Medical Officers at the NICD, **Dr Vivien Essel** played, and

continues to play an important role in the NICD's response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the provision of clinical support to healthcare practitioners by means of the NICD Clinician Hotline.

This pandemic has had a huge impact on many lives and will continue to have an impact for years to come, which is why studying this disease and its effects on the population is what **Dr Sibongile Walaza**, a Senior Epidemiologist, is passionate about. Over time Dr Walaza has been involved in monitoring the epidemiological patterns of the COVID-19 pandemic, collecting and analysing data to assist the public health response. Dr Walaza continues to study the behaviour of the virus, not only on a grand societal scale but also from person to person to determine the degree of infection.

Assisting the Epidemiology team with the important task of collecting and analysing the daily COVID-19 case data is what consumed most of **Dr Gillian Hunt's** time since the first case was reported in South Africa. As a Senior Medical Scientist, Dr Hunt states that monitoring the trends of COVID-19, or any disease for that matter, is essential as it informs the responses required. Dr Hunt urged young women to choose a career in public health as they will

then have the potential to improve the health and wellbeing of the nation.

To many, science may be intimidating but **Dr Nicole Wolter**, a Principal Medical Scientist, urged women to not be scared of science. She encouraged young women to explore different scientific disciplines and talk to other female scientists to learn of the opportunities available within a specific career path. Dr Wolter has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and was initially involved in the development and validation of a laboratory test for COVID-19. Dr Wolter now assists with the collection and analysis of COVID-19 trend data

to help guide public health policies and practices aimed at managing the pandemic.

We have seen an array of skill-sets displayed by these “shepioneers”- each person fulfils a different role but all work together in the fight against COVID-19.

**Prof Lynn Morris**, NICD Interim Executive Director states that one of her greatest successes has been getting all NICD staff to buy into a common vision and work collaboratively.

Prof Morris oversees the NICD’s coordinated surveillance response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is particularly proud that the NICD has

continued with its routine work while ensuring its COVID-19 surveillance demands are met. Prof Morris emphasised the importance of having more women in scientific leadership positions to inspire other women to achieve such positions and to introduce a diverse style and emphasis to management.

There are countless other women who have worked tirelessly at NICD in the COVID-19 response and we applaud them all. We acknowledge the balancing of home and work life pressures as mothers; sisters; partners and care givers.

## Awareness Days Sharing The Limelight

Health awareness days are a long-standing tradition of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and are used as a vehicle to educate and inform the public about communicable diseases. Challenged by the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NICD had to embrace a different way of raising health awareness.

Centres, in collaboration with the Communications Unit, took to the challenge and found creative ways to commemorate awareness days, instead of campus activity.

In this article, we look at some of the innovative ways in which these awareness days were commemorated while adhering to the COVID-19 physical distance prevention measures, limitations with large meetings and most working from home.

The Centre for Healthcare-Associated Infections, Antimicrobial Resistance and Mycoses (CHARM) rose to the challenge when they commemorated the Fungal Disease Awareness Week, 21-25 September 2020. The centre ran an interactive online campaign that included a Facebook live session with Prof Nelesh Govender, online competitions for staff, external stakeholders and their children, using the theme: “Think Fungus”. This campaign enjoyed a great response, reaching over 800 000 stakeholders.



Taking advantage of the technologies in its arsenal the Centre for Emerging, Zoonotic and Parasitic Diseases (CEZPD) commemorated the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Malaria week from 2-6 November 2020 by giving safe traveling tips to areas where malaria transmission occurs. Other publicly circulated awareness resources included a video by Prof John Freen, a podcast on the importance of community participation in the fight against malaria, and, finally, a paper by Prof Basil Brooke, Dr Jaishree Raman, Prof John Freen and Prof Lucille on malaria control during the pandemic.

Following suit, the Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis (CRDM) hosted a virtual 5km walk/run for World Pneumonia Day with prizes up for grabs. They encouraged people from all age groups and fitness levels to join. This encouraged movement during the “new normal” of physical distancing. These virtual runs/walks

were from 6-11 November 2020 while World Pneumonia Day was observed on 12 November 2020.

To raise awareness for World Antimicrobial Awareness Week, 18-24 November 2020, CHARM decided to reach stakeholders with life-saving information through podcasts. Despite the social engagement challenges posed by the pandemic, the Centre remained resolute in delivering crucial information and education to facilitate better practices among the general population, health professionals and decision-makers to mitigate against the scourge of drug-resistant infections.

With the help of technology, the NICD Centres continue to demonstrate adaptability and agility in the face of this unprecedented pandemic. Our Centre for HIV and STIs will soon be announcing plans for the commemoration of World Aids day, more information will follow soon.



## SAFETP COVID-19 Response - Training Field Epidemiology Residents To Run Towards The Blazing Fire



*SAFETP Field Epidemiologist, Khuliso Ravhuhali (right), accompanied by NICD staff, ready to collect specimens from close contacts to the first case of COVID-19 in South Africa, March 2020.*

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and the NICD activated its Emergency Operations Centre (EOC). Suddenly, the NICD EOC with a full-time workforce of one,

needed to expand rapidly. The South African Field Epidemiology Training Programme (SAFETP) responded to the call by providing a surge capacity of field epidemiology trainees known as SAFETP residents. This was after all what SAFETP residents train to do — run towards the blazing fire, not away from it. The deployment of SAFETP residents culminated in the public health workforce working tirelessly around the clock, weeks before the first case of COVID-19 was identified in South Africa.

SAFETP is a rigorous, two-year training programme, where residents spend two-thirds of their training in the field applying their classroom skills in disease surveillance and outbreak detection and response. The program was initiated in 2006 as a collaboration between the National Department of Health, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to increase South Africa's

field epidemiological capacity.

In preparation for the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in South Africa, residents evaluated the readiness of healthcare facilities to receive and manage COVID-19 cases and responded to queries from an anxious public on the NICD 24-hour hotline, providing advice on how to protect oneself against COVID-19 and recognise signs and symptoms. Residents assigned to provincial and district health departments developed response plans and standard operating procedures and trained healthcare workers, frontline staff, and military personnel.

SAFETP residents and staff applied their risk communication training skills to translate information, education, and communication materials into local languages, and provide locally relevant and scientifically accurate information on social media platforms and radio stations.

### From preparedness to response

Once the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in South Africa on March 5, 2020, SAFETP seamlessly switched gears from preparedness to response. SAFETP alumnus and field epidemiologist, Khuliso Ravhuhali, joined the NICD response team that initiated contact tracing in KwaZulu-Natal. Since March, Ravhuhali has been deployed to KwaZulu-Natal on three separate occasions to provide epidemiological support to districts as their cases rapidly climbed. In May 2020, second-year resident Idah Rikhotso, accompanied Ravhuhali on a 3-week deployment to respond to a COVID-19 outbreak among sanitation workers.

In August 2020, Ravhuhali was deployed again, this time to the Thabazimbi District in Limpopo Province, accompanied by first-year residents



*First-year SAFETP residents, Karabo Born, Marceline Mapiye (left), and Mokgadi Monwa were deployed to Thabazimbi district, Limpopo Province. In Thabazimbi, 80% of COVID-19 cases were being reported from local mines. SAFETP worked with the mining laboratories to link case reports to the Notifiable Medical Conditions surveillance system at NICD for real-time notification and reporting.*

Karabo Born, Mokgadi Monwa, and Marceline Mapiye. SAFETP carried out a situational assessment, assisted with data management and analysis, reviewed the contact tracing process, and visited mining sites to review case management and contact tracing activities. About 80% of COVID-19 cases were being diagnosed among mine workers in the Thabazimbi District and SAFETP helped link case reporting from mine laboratories to the Notifiable Medical Conditions (NMC) surveillance system for real-time notification and reporting. SAFETP also facilitated systematic submission of data from the district to the province, closing data gaps and discrepancies between district and provincial reporting systems.



## Building epidemiological capacity to improve public health preparedness and response

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread across all 52 districts of South Africa, overwhelming the health systems, SAFETP staff in collaboration with the National Department of Health (NDoH) facilitated weeklong training workshops on COVID-19 preparedness and response. In early October 2020, SAFETP trained 74 healthcare workers across four Northern Cape districts (Francis Baard, ZF Mgcau, Pixley ka Seme and

John Taolo Gaetsewe) to strengthen COVID-19 case identification and reporting, contact tracing, data management and analysis, outbreak investigation and report writing. To emphasise the practical application of concepts, the team combined formal lectures, group work, and computer-based exercises. SAFETP has received a number of requests for this training to be replicated across the country.

## The future of field epidemiology

COVID-19 has highlighted the important role played by field epidemiologists and Field Epidemiology Training Programmes in global health. The demand for field epidemiologists will continue to increase in the future and SAFETP will expand to meet this need while building regional epidemiology capacity in Southern Africa. In 2021, SAFETP welcomes its fifteenth cohort representing a 70% increase in the number of enrolled trainees, including five residents from neighbouring Lesotho and Eswatini.

## The NICD Bids A Fond Adieu To Ma'm Lindy

The reception area at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has been changed forever, now that the much-loved, "face of the NICD", Lindy Rakau has officially become a retiree. Affectionately known as Ma'm Lindy at the NICD, Rakau boasts an impressive career spanning over 33 years at this esteemed establishment.

Ma'm Lindy joined the then National Institute for Virology (which later evolved into the NICD) in March 1987, as a server in the Canteen. After five years she swapped sandwich-making for washing laboratory coats and overalls. While working in the laundry department, Rakau realised she missed interacting with people, so when a position in the Mail Room became available, she immediately applied and much to her delight was offered the position. After a few years in the mail room, her impressive work ethic and potential was recognised by a colleague, Johnson Maga, who encouraged her to apply for the NICD receptionist position in 2004. Reluctantly she submitted her application and was totally surprised when she was the successful candidate. For the next 16 years Ma'm Lindy would be the first point of contact for callers to the NICD. Little did Ma'm Lindy realise that she would be integral to the



Ma'm Lindy Rakau photographed outside the NICD reception building

NICD's response to various outbreaks, including Ebola, Listeriosis and most recently, COVID-19.

The 2nd of 7 children, Ma'm Lindy was raised by her father as her mother sadly passed away at a young age. As a little girl, playing in the streets of Alexandra, Ma'm Lindy knew she had a higher purpose, simply to change the world with kindness. At the NICD she achieved exactly that, and so much more, as she built meaningful and lasting relationships with her NICD colleagues.

Ma'm Lindy looks back at her time at the NICD with great fondness and pride, stating that she'll miss her "kids" and that it was an honour to work for the NICD and to be the face of the company!

Rakau is now looking forward to later starts in the day and to spending more time with family and friends. She still has one unfilled lifelong dream of opening an orphanage in Tembisa, but knowing Ma'm Lindy, nothing will stop her from fulfilling her dream.

## Taking The Science Forums Online



The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way knowledge is exchanged among scientists, epidemiologists and researchers at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), among others. The hosting of the Science and Epi forums is one of the many ways the pandemic has affected the NICD. After being on campus for over 15 years, these research forums have had to go online.

We spend some time with Dr Gillian Hunt, Senior Medical Scientist at the Centre for HIV and STIs and one of the lead facilitators and convenor for the online research forums, about what the transition to virtual meetings was like.

### Transitioning

For the first few months, the research forums were not held, all hands, minds and efforts were focused on capacity building for COVID-19 in South Africa. Thereafter, there was a greater need for the forums as a platform to share

information on the progress and research concerning the virus. "The transition was not a difficult one", Dr Hunt admits. This is because most of the NICD staff have prior experience with online conferences. Dr Hunt does not account for too much struggle or worry but emphasises the importance of planning to achieve a successful event.

### Outcomes from going online

#### 1. A larger reach.

The online forum allows people to join the session from any location around the world. Through the online platform, over 320 users were reached in just one session. The NHLS Project ECHO was a great factor to this success because of the platform capabilities, allowing to reach over 100 users in one webinar.

#### 2. Presenter availability

Speakers and presenters from abroad and other provinces were willingly available. They do not have to worry about accommodation and travelling.

#### 3. Prior planning

As mentioned above, proper planning allows you to make room for a contingency plan and resolve any connectivity issues ahead of time.

#### 4. Quality internet connection is key

To run a successful online forum, the speakers or presenters need to have a good, stable connection and be audible.

#### 5. Accessibility of the forum

The online technology allows for sessions to be recorded and can therefore be accessed at a later stage. This also increases the reach.

#### 6. Relaxed presenters

The speakers were notably relaxed. They were not confronted with a large crowd and having to let their public speaking skills come to the forefront.

#### The future of the online forums

Overall, the online technology has had a positive impact on the research forums and Dr Hunt speculates that they might be used even more in future because of the reach and access to speakers from any location in the world.

Even so, the sessions on campus are still encouraged and perhaps an integration of the two can result in a wider and more engaging distribution of academic information.

Though the online sessions were successful, the engagement from participants was much lower than with the on-campus forums. Despite that, Dr Hunt is of the view that the NICD has proved to be agile, flexible and proactive in the quest to be the prime resource of knowledge for communicable diseases amid the pandemic.

**The NICD Scientific forum is organised by Drs Dana Savulescu, Veerle Msimang, Nicole Wolter, Shaheed Vally Omar and Gillian Hunt, and supported by Irma Latsky, Leyya Essop and Goitsemang Mekwe, Communications Unit and IT.**

## A COVID-19 Partnership That Hits The Mark

The National Department of Social Development (DSD) recently recognised the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) for the instrumental role the organisation has played in the provision of essential services to vulnerable communities. In partnership with the DSD, the NICD implemented a COVID-19 surveillance program focusing on long-term care facilities that has provided the department with essential data and insights.

The program is part of the DATCOV surveillance led by Prof Lucille Blumberg and Dr Waasila Jassat.

On 30 October 2020 the Deputy Minister of Social Development, Ms Hendrietta Bogopane-Zulu presented a certificate of appreciation to the NICD's Bev Cowper, Maureen Masha and Tracy Arense.





# Festive Season Holiday Safety Awareness

The year 2020 will be notorious for many reasons, and as the year slowly winds down, we are all reminded to celebrate the festive season safely and responsibly. From COVID-19 and malaria, to a variety of foodborne diseases, practising a few precautionary measures will minimise the risk of these nasties putting a damper on your merriment.

As we all look forward to spending quality time with family and friends this festive season, it is important to remember

that COVID-19 remains rife and that simple behavioural changes can help keep COVID-19 at bay and off your guest list. Similarly, if you're staying home, travelling locally or abroad, it's important to be aware of the potential risks of contracting an infectious disease. Knowing about infectious diseases can make all the difference when it comes to protecting yourself and your loved ones.

**Here are five tips to keep you safe during the holidays:**

## Food safety

Food-borne diseases peak during summer months due to warmer temperatures, which can cause foodborne germs to thrive. Whether you are having a braai or heading out to the beach, ensure all food hygiene is adhered to and keep a cooler box handy.



## Stay up to date with vaccines

Making sure your child's vaccination record is up to date is key to protecting them against serious diseases throughout their lifetime. The summer is a great time to make appointments for your child to get recommended vaccines or to catch up on vaccines they might have missed when they were younger.



## Protect yourself and your loved ones from malaria

If you are traveling within South Africa, familiarise yourself with the malaria risk map (found on the NICD website) and talk to your doctor about preventive measures.



## Wash your hands

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps we can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. Many diseases, including COVID-19 and diarrheal diseases, are largely spread through contaminated hands.



## Protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections

Protect yourself, and your partner, from contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV by practising safe sex and using protection.



**The NICD wishes its employees and stakeholders all the best this festive season.**

*Cheers to 2020!*