



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



South Africa COVID-19 and Vaccine Social Listening Report

13 October 2021, Report 22

This is a weekly report of COVID & vaccine sentiment, rumours & misinformation in SA. Further info [here](#).

KEY TRENDS

- **Vooma Vaccination Weekend:** Indications from many districts that that Vooma Vaccine Weekend has led to increased vaccinations that weekend and in the following weeks, with the presence of political leaders and celebrities attracting many people. There are also reports from several districts frustrated that the initiative did not come to their area. An anti-vaccination protest happened in Cape Town during the weekend.
- **Digital Vaccination Certificates / Passports:** This was the huge topic of the week, with over 5,000% increases in Google Searches in SA, over 35% of all Covid & vaccine social media debate, a high percentage ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). There is both positive support for the initiative and opposition. There is confusion over difficulties related to the launch of the website. Also, there's concern that certificates will only be valid for six months. Opposition to passports leads some to complain about 'vaccine apartheid', "infringement of human rights" ([here](#) and [here](#)), "segregation through vaccination Dompas".
- **End of the third Covid wave:** There is widespread relief that numbers of Covid infections and deaths have dropped.
- **Undocumented people:** Positive announcement from KZN Health MEC Ms Nomagugu Simelane welcoming undocumented people to vaccine sites ([here](#)).
- **SA travellers:** SA is removed from the UK red list [here](#) to widespread acclaim in SA.
- **International efforts to counter misinformation:** WHO releases statement linking COVID deaths to misinformation ([here](#)) and U.S. Surgeon General issues an Advisory on Building a Healthy Information Environment ([here](#)). YouTube announces ban on misinformation content [here](#)
- **Callcentre:** The Covid - hotline call centre reports majority of calls related to practical problems accessing digital certificate site and concerns that SMSs not received.
- On **safety**; a news [article](#) titled about "COVID-19 vaccine: No deaths in SA linked to jab" received some traction with nearly 500 retweets and almost 800 likes this week. Many rejected this [post](#) citing claims of severe vaccine injuries and even death. There were also anecdotal claims of people who have died from the vaccine from a [tweet](#) account which, frequently shares anti-vaccination content. Similarly, many smaller [posts](#) made claims about severe vaccine injuries. A post about "authorities lying to the public on COVID-19 medications" trended across the board ([here](#) and [here](#)).
- **Facebook** ([here](#)) has been overrun by anti-vaccine misinformation. 150,000 user accounts which were disabled for spreading COVID-19 misinformation produced half of the anti-vaccine posts. The report describes a company outfoxed by a group of anti-vaccine activists that it called "big whales" ([here](#)).
- **Trending in Google searches on COVID-19 vaccines.** News of non-medical benefits of vaccination, e.g. free entry to the Bafana Bafana qualifier gained attention ([here](#)) as well as levels of engagements with vaccine-related tweets and Facebook posts last week, at 29,000 and 60,000 respectively, while engagements with vaccine content on digital news media dropped 10%.
- **Unsubstantiated claims continue** to circulate about vaccine injuries and death, government / institutional manipulation, conspiracy theories and similar mis- and disinformation. Amongst thousands of tweets related to COVID vaccinations, CABC analysis revealed this week a slight decline in online conversations related to conspiracy theories when compared to vaccine hesitancy and vaccine scepticism due to 'reasonable' concerns. This week anti-vaccination messages One of the most prevalent

anti-vaccination misinformation ([here](#)) suggests that the COVID-19 vaccine was designed specifically as a tool for depopulation, also [here](#) and [here](#) that the effects of depopulation will “start working in 3-6 months”. Concerning was an unverified claim about a cover-up of deaths by [article](#) titled “CDC Quietly Deletes 6,000 COVID Vaccine Deaths”. Another [post](#) suggested again that the vaccination rollout in SA and throughout the continent is a means to experiment on African people.

- **Claims about manipulations by authorities** about suitable Covid-19 medications. including the [Ivermectin](#) and [Fenofibrate](#) drugs. Prof Helen Rees, chair of the board of SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (Sahpra), said “there is no conclusive evidence that ivermectin can kill a virus in a human being” ([here](#)). One US-originated conspiracy [theory](#), which has gained significant traction amongst South African twitter audiences, accuses renowned US infectious disease experts of conspiring with pharmaceutical companies for profit.
- **Top five tweets (below) in COVID-19 vaccine conversations** were about the vaccine certificate, mandatory vaccination, doctors in NYC fired for not taking the vaccine, with PANDA’s Nick Hudson making yet another cynical appearance. While more people expressed vaccine eagerness to assist the country ensure that the country “returns to normal” and most have attributed this trend to the increased uptake of vaccinations. Others are concerned about those who think they are immune to the virus after vaccinating; as some of them are seen without the masks even in the crowded spaces ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

LOCAL / DISTRICT / PROVINCIAL ISSUES

This new section summarises social listening from areas around the country. For more information on reports from health districts around the country, see [here](#).

- **Garden Route, Western Cape;** there increase in the vaccine uptake only on weekends because most people are working and not available during the week. Many people still believe that they will die 2 years after vaccinating.
- **Buffalo City, Eastern Cape** reporting an increasing uptake of vaccine but the youth is still reluctant. Some learners are not prepared to vaccinate because he still believed that the virus was manmade, poisonous and that people would die after two years.
- **Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti, North West:** There is a steady increase in people getting vaccinated in Locations, with increasing vaccine acceptance in youth. Transport remains a major challenge for people without cars or money for taxi fare to reach the vaccination sites.
- **Garden Route, Western Cape:** Vaccine uptake increases only on weekends especially among working people, but some do not return for their second jabs. The staff at the vaccination sites also require protection from abusive and drunk locals who disrupt services.
- **Cape Metro, Western Cape:** On 2 October a Men’s Conference on vaccination was held, run in partnership with Emthonjeni counseling and training. It led to increased vaccine demand but there were no pop up sites nearby. Also widespread concerns among other men about the possibilities of long-term adverse event including deaths after vaccination,
- **Ehlanzeni, Mpumalanga:** Vaccine uptake has increased following outreach sites, which suggests there is a need for sites that are within easy travel of the population. However, older people over 50 are vaccinating more than young people, and females more than men. Less than 15% of the youth have vaccinated here. A barrier to vaccination for the young people could be the high rate of unemployment because they are more pre-occupied with finding jobs first.
- **Namaqua, Northern Cape:** Growing vaccine uptake numbers because of the increasing vaccine acceptance in this District, but it is limited due to misinformation. There are concerns about misinformation on the following:
 - Rumours that vaccines are killing people are still common (though now decreasing following the circulation of WHO debunking this).
 - The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is more effective than the Pfizer one.
 - The vaccine is from the devil and the mark of the beast (666).
 - The vaccine causes erectile dysfunction and infertility.
 - Covid-19 can be cured with herbs and other natural remedies.
- **Bojanala, North West:** Vaccination is currently increasing, following the Vooma Weekend. A team of volunteers was organised to assist together with political, traditional and religious leaders, which boosted vaccine uptake.
- **Mangaung, Free State:** Vaccine acceptance has increased especially in the communities near pop-up sites. Word of mouth information has helped in the shopping centers, malls and towns. Self

registration still appears to be a barrier among people without phones. Some parents feel there is not enough priority given to their 18 year olds who are still at school.

MISINFORMATION

- **MISINFO:** ~~Vaccines cause infertility.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this, but getting Covid can negatively impact fertility. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Natural immunity is better than vaccine immunity.~~ **TRUTH:** There is evidence natural immunity does help protect you, but the evidence is unclear how long natural immunity lasts and how well it works against other variants compared to vaccine immunity. See [here](#) and paper saying 'vaccination offers higher protection than previous COVID-19 infection' ([here](#)). Even if you've had Covid, get vaccinated.
- **MISINFO:** ~~Ivermectin cures / prevents Covid and is being withheld despite being cheap.~~ **TRUTH:** Ivermectin, while safe for some uses, has not been shown to be effective in treating Covid yet. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)
- **MISINFO:** ~~The side effects of the vaccine are intentionally under reported and so are the deaths caused by the vaccine.~~ **TRUTH:** There probably is under-reporting of side effects, but the Government and the NICD encourage reporting of adverse effects ([here](#)). The SA Health Products Regulator investigates adverse events & deaths that could have been caused by Covid vaccination and reports on this ([here](#)).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Tweet from Senator Ron Johnson saying "Data from England show 63% of Delta deaths in last 7.5 months were fully vaxxed.~~ **TRUTH:** This is false and has been debunked ([here](#)). This was circulated by the account '@isaacCullen' which frequently posts mis- & disinformation.

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Continue with the production of information for community mobiliser to help them debunk rampant misinformation in the communities.
- Continue providing accurate information with verified statistics on the risk of contracting the virus and having severe symptoms after vaccination.
- Continue providing information that demonstrates that the risks associated with contracting COVID-19 far outweigh the risks of vaccination, and why vaccines are considered safe and effective.
- Continue to communicate through Covid-19 champions who have gotten the vaccine and/or influencers championing communication to the public as living testimonies.
- Emphasize hopeful messages highlighting vaccines are crucial for ending the pandemic and share solidarity messages around protective measure and safe behaviours.
- **Vooma:** Several districts are unhappy that the Vooma Weekend campaign did not come to their areas, which indicates that there is high demand for localised solutions which make vaccines accessible. This should be continued after the elections to encourage increased vaccination at scale.

ISSUES RAISED FOR FOLLOW-UP:

- **Cape Metro, Western Cape** is in need of additional pop-up vaccination sites that close late in the afternoon. There are four pop-up sites but these are not enough to meet increased demand.
- **Cape Winelands, Western Cape** currently there is just one health facility in Klapmuts offering vaccination on just one day per week. This needs to be expanded.
- **Garden Route, Western Cape** in need of law enforcement officers on weekends to protect staff at the vaccination sites because the locals are abusive when they are drunk.
- **Bojanala, North West** is in need of more pop-up vaccination sites in the remote areas and the outreach teams need more mobilization teams to service the sub-districts.
- **Manguang, Free State** in need of pop-up vaccination that are closer to the residential areas because most are in towns, shopping mall which are still far from those who can't afford transport.
- **Buffalo City, Eastern Cape;** the mobilizing teams in need of more loud hailers and to be involved in the planning by districts which could strengthen teamwork because they are currently working in silos.

- **Namaqua, Northern Cape;** Limited success due to the continued misinformation and disinformation. Urgent need of a loud hailer and information material such as banners, pamphlets, flyers, etc. to help debunk the rumours.
- Consider encouraging public and private medical professionals to report severe / unusual vaccine side effects to NICD through specific channel as individuals unlikely to report. There is strong anecdotal evidence there is under-reporting.

METHODOLOGY AND COLLABORATION

The Social Listening & Infodemiology team that produces this report is part of the Risk Communications & Community Engagement Working Group of the Department of Health. This report is compiled following the methodology of the WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA, see [here](#)), the “Identify” stage. We pool information from the following:

- **SA National Department of Health**
- **Covid Hotline:** Reports from the national Covid call centre
- **Praekelt.Org:** NDOH Covid WhatsApp system
- **WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)**
- **UNICEF:** digital analysis of content on Google, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and digital news
- **Red Cross:** Network of over 2,000 community volunteers reporting misinformation and concerns
- **Real 411 Media Monitoring Africa:** a mis- and disinformation reporting and debunking initiative
- **COVID Comms:** a network of communications specialists that produces information on the pandemic
- **DOH Free State & KZN:** Provincial Departments of Health
- **Community Constituency Front (CCF), People’s Vaccine Campaign**
- **Centre for Communication Impact, Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change, Section 27**
- **Medical Research Council, National Institute for Communicable Diseases, Right To Care, SA Vaccination and Immunisation Centre, Health Systems Trust, HSRC, IPSOS**
- **Universities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Free State, Wits, Stellenbosch, Sefako Makgatho**

OTHER RESOURCES	
Background info for this report	Here
SA Corona virus website	Here
Real 411 to report misinfo	Here

Other organisations involved: Government Communications & Information Service, SA Council of Churches, Clinton Health Access Initiative, Heartlines, Children’s Radio Foundation, DG Murray Trust, People’s Health Movement, Business for SA, SA Minerals Council, Wits Reproductive Health & HIV Institute, UN Verified, HealthEnabled, Deaf SA, SA National Council for the Blind, Treatment Action Campaign and Disability SA.

Contact:

Nombulelo Leburu, National Department of Health.	nombulelo.leburu@health.gov.za	082 444 9503
Peter Benjamin, Demand Acceleration Team.	peter@healthenabled.org	082 829 3353
Charity Bhengu, National Department of Health.	charity.bhengu@health.gov.za	083 679 7424