

■ COVID-19

Human trials for vaccine begins

UKZN scientists warn many deaths still likely before virus is conquered

TANYA WATERWORTH

MANY deaths are still likely to happen because of the coronavirus, but a promising vaccine against Covid-19, developed by the University of Oxford, started human trials this week.

That was the latest yesterday during an update on the pandemic from infectious disease specialist at KZN Research and Innovation Sequencing Platform (Krisp), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Dr Richard Lessells, who has also been part of the UKZN Covid-19 war room team.

Lessells said South Africa was being recognised for its successful handling of the outbreak and the country would have been reporting about 50 000 cases had it followed the UK trajectory.

According to the latest figures released on Thursday night by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize, South Africa had 3 953 confirmed cases, with 75 deaths.

But with a record jump of a daily increase of 318 cases, Lessells said yesterday that South Africans should not become complacent.

President Cyril Ramaphosa relaxed the complete lockdown status of the country to a level 4 as from next Friday, allowing some business sectors back into the economy.

Lessells said South Africa's trajectory of cases was similar to that of Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand who have all been more successful in containing the virus than Europe and the US.

"This was primarily due to the very early response and lockdown before we had one death reported, which was significantly earlier than many other countries," he said, adding that the proactive measure of ramping up testing and screening would also help to identify cases in communities and reduce transmissions.

On a global scale, he said, "the reality is this disease is going to cause many deaths", while in South Africa, the fact that winter and the flu season were approaching would see an increase in deaths.

He highlighted that across the world, scientists had been sharing research on a scale never seen before and to already have a human trial

beginning within four months was a "remarkable pace" for science.

This week the University of Oxford began its human trial phase which will include just over 1 000 people.

"Oxford developed a vaccine for one of the previous coronaviruses, which is why they have been able to develop quickly and get to human trials. But there is so much more collaboration on vaccines in the scientific world. This virus is not only going to change us as a society, but also as a scientific society," he added.

Also on the UKZN war room team, Professor Francesco Petruccione, interim director at National Institute for Theoretical and Computational Science (NITheCS) and Pro Vice-Chancellor for Big Data and Informatics, agreed, saying, "we have all embraced that science is to be shared and this is going to stay with us longer than Covid-19".

This week a team of world-renowned scientists based at UKZN launched a fund-raising campaign to support the analysis of Covid-19 data, which could provide vital research and insight on the spread of the virus across South Africa and globally.

Krisp and the Big Data Flagship Programme of the UKZN has a multi-disciplinary team of world-renowned experts which focuses on analysis and control of viral outbreaks and genomic analysis.

They have produced five of the six Covid-19 viral genomes in the country, which clearly showed how the virus was introduced into South Africa. Earlier this week, director of Krisp, Professor Tulio de Oliveira said, "We have been reversing the brain drain and attracting top South African researchers back to the country," said De Oliveira.

The government has already used the team's results to show that South Africa is flattening the curve.

By supporting the campaign, donors qualify for a section 18A tax certificate issued by the UKZN Foundation.

To donate to Krisp and the UKZN Foundation in fighting the coronavirus, go to BackaBuddy at <https://www.backabuddy.co.za/champion/project/ukzn-covid-19>



FIFTEEN-year-old Milan Cilliers exercising his dogs Violet, left, and Lily on the Durban yacht club floating jetty where he is staying with his parents, Carin and Tom, during lockdown. | SHELLY KJONSTAD African News Agency(ANA)

■ LABEL HERE

Lockdown with Lanner falcons

TANYA WATERWORTH

THE fish eagle's call, a pair of Lanner falcons and tropical fish.

Those have been welcome sights and sounds at Durban's Yacht Mole since the start of lockdown.

There are a number of vessels moored in the yacht basin, including some foreign yachts, and all have to remain where they are until lockdown is over. No yacht is allowed to move from its mooring and water sports, such as kayaking, are banned.

Skipper Brandon Walsh, who grew up in Alveston, just outside Durban, said they were ready to leave for the Mozambican coast when the lockdown was announced.

"We are here to do repairs, but we have to import rigging from Italy and so have to wait until everything is back to normal before we can order the rigging which is not available anywhere in SA. Then we will have to wait at least another eight weeks for delivery. We could still be here towards the end of the year," said Walsh.

He added that the yachting season ran from April to December, ahead of the cyclone season and that the yachting cruise and charter industry "was totally dead" in tourist hot spots such as Vilancoulos (Mozambique) and Madagascar because of Covid-19.

On the positive side, he said staying in the Durban Yacht Mole was safe and quiet, while the water was far cleaner with far less sewerage and very little rubbish compared with what had been happening for a number of years.

The sewerage and litter in the yacht basin had been in the news over the last couple of years, particularly after bad storms when the city's sewerage flowed through pipes known as "lavender creek" into the small craft harbour.

"There are only about 10 to 12 people staying on their yachts, including some French and Argentinians. Before the lockdown, it sometimes felt as

though we lived in a fish bowl because so many people would stand and take selfies next to the yacht. It's much quieter now," said Walsh.

"And there are definitely more birds. I have heard fish eagles here for the first time in years and there are a pair of Lanner falcons who have been hunting the pigeons."

Another South African family staying in the yacht mole are Tom, Carin and Milan Cilliers from Newcastle, along with their whippet, Lily, and Italian greyhound, Violet.

Carin and Milan exercise the two lean dogs up and down the jetty, where their boat is moored, a couple of times a day.

"We bought the boat about a year ago and moved to Durban permanently at the beginning of the year as we are still getting the boat ready."

"It's so nice here and since the lockdown, the water has been much cleaner and I have seen some tropical fish which we didn't see before."

"We all (yachties) know each other and there's a high police presence at the gate which makes us feel safe," said Carin.

Milan, 15, who home-schools, agreed saying: "It's so much cleaner and much less noise around, especially over the weekends, since the lockdown."

"I run the dogs along the jetty and we have made ourselves a gym, including some oil cans for biceps," he said.

■ ADVENTURE

Grounded 'Zen' pilot learns to savour life

TANYA WATERWORTH

AVIATOR and "Zen" pilot, Robert DeLaurentis, who was flying from the South Pole to the North Pole in his plane, Citizen of the World, has been caught in Spain by the coronavirus lockdown.

The 54-year-old adventurer, who had covered 22 000 nautical miles of roughly 30 000 nautical miles from South to North Pole, told the Independent on Saturday this week that one of the primary lessons he had learned since the eruption of the pandemic was that life was to be savoured, and not rushed through in a blur.

DeLaurentis, a former lieutenant-commander in the US Navy and who has a degree in spiritual psychology, was in Durban at the beginning of February as he started heading to the North Pole through Africa, after his trip to the South Pole.

He arrived in Spain on March 16, where he initially stayed at a monastery in north-eastern Spain until the first quarantine started and all non-monks were asked to leave. He moved to Terragona and then to a villa on the hills above Sitges.

Once quarantine ends, he plans to continue his journey after completing some work on his plane.

His epic "Pole to Pole" journey started with his non-stop flight from Ushuaia in Argentina to the South Pole and back again, during which he had to navigate the dangerous "Zone of Confusion" in the 50-nautical mile airspace just before and after the



ZEN pilot Robert DeLaurentis during his stopover in Durban recently. | BONGANI MBATHA African News Agency (ANA)

South Pole where GPS doesn't work.

As a back-up to the high-tech avionics, he installed an old-school directional gyro, as well as taking a line on the position of the sun, assuming it would not be cloudy.

When his tracking equipment failed, "I was clearly on my own, isolated in what could be perceived as a hostile and lonely world. Honestly, I was scared..."

But between his intermittent modern equipment and old-school equipment, he kept his course.

"When I felt panic at times, thinking I was close to powerless to change what was happening to me, fortunately all my spiritual training came flying back into my mind, reminding me to focus on what I could control and to trust the universe to take care of everything else. I took a deep breath and decided to enjoy the journey and the learning."

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■ TRENDING

President jokes about his mishap

FRANK CHEMALY

PRESIDENT Cyril Ramaphosa joked with reporters and health workers yesterday over his mask mishap on national television, on Thursday evening.

Unfolding a vibrant coloured mask, while inspecting a Covid-19 treatment centre at the Charlotte Maxeke Hospital in Johannesburg yesterday, he said: "For those of you who were laughing at me yesterday, let me tell you something. I'm going to open a TV channel where I'm going to teach people how to put on a mask."

"So you can unroll how a mask is put on." He burst into a broad grin, as people laughed with him.

The president was with Gauteng Premier Manemolla David Makhura and Health MEC Bandile Masuku, assessing the province's plans to treat Covid-19 patients.

On Thursday evening, after announcing a relaxation of lockdown restrictions – from Level 5 to Level 4 – the president inspired hundreds of jokes on social media when he failed to put on his cloth mask properly, hooking it over his eyes and nose, instead of his mouth.

By Friday, the mood had changed on Twitter, with #CyrilFridays trending and the general consensus that the mask mishap made the president all the more human.

@QueenNands tweeted: "Man, how I love my president! I love that you were so visibly stressed about your mask, fiddling with it during your whole speech, and I love how you wanted to end off your very important speech with such an endearing act. #maskchallenge #CyrilFridays."

@BiancavanWyk16 tweeted: "There's nothing as appealing as a man that steps up during a crisis and takes control of a situation while making others feel safe. Even more appealing is when the same man can make you laugh."



GAUTENG Health MEC Dr Bandile Masuku and his team with President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital