



CATEGORIES

[Academic and Peer Reviewed Articles](#)

[Recent Public Health News](#)

[Training and Resources](#)

[Publications and Reports](#)

[Conferences and Events](#)

[Job Opportunities](#)

ACADEMIC AND PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

The Tobacco Wars' Lessons for the Vaccination Wars

The New England Journal of Medicine | 10 April 2022

Robert Bazell, Howard Koh, Barry Bloom

Covid-19 will soon have killed 1 million Americans. When vaccines first became available in late 2020, surveys indicated that about one third of U.S. adults were keen to be vaccinated, 15% expressed strong resistance to vaccination (a proportion that has stayed fairly constant), and the remainder didn't harbor strong ideological resistance.¹ About 27% of U.S. adults remain unvaccinated. An important challenge involves reaching the undecided — an issue for booster doses, future pandemics, and all vaccines. In the midst of deafening noise, much of it hateful, filled with falsehoods, and purely political, we believe public health shouldn't lose its voice.

Mental health problems in children with intellectual disability

The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health | 11 April 2022

Vasiliki Totsika, Ashley Liew, Michael Absoud, Colleen Adnams, Eric Emerson

Intellectual disability ranks in the top ten causes of disease burden globally and is the top cause in children younger than 5 years. 2–3% of children have an intellectual disability, and about 15% of children present with differences consistent with an intellectual disability (ie, global developmental delay and borderline intellectual functioning). In this Review, we discuss the prevalence of mental health problems, interventions to address these, and issues of access to treatment and services. Where possible, we take a global perspective, given most children with intellectual disability live in low-income and middle-income countries. Approximately 40% of children with intellectual disability present with a diagnosable mental disorder, a rate that is at least double that in children without intellectual disability. Most risk factors for poor mental health and barriers to accessing support are not unique to people with intellectual disability. With proportionate universalism as the guiding principle for reducing poor mental health at scale, we discuss four directions for addressing the mental health inequity in intellectual disability.

Comparable neutralisation evasion of SARS-CoV-2 omicron subvariants BA.1, BA.2, and BA.3

The Lancet Infectious Disease | 12 April 2022

Prerna Arora, Lu Zhang, Cheila Rocha, Anzhalika Sidarovich

The SARS-CoV-2 omicron (B.1.1.529) variant has rapidly become globally dominant, displacing the previously dominant delta (B.1.617.2) variant. The viral spike (S) protein is the key target of the neutralising antibody response, and the omicron variant harbours more than 35 mutations in the S protein, which allow highly efficient evasion from neutralising antibodies.¹ In keeping with these findings, the omicron variant efficiently spreads in populations with a high percentage of convalescent or vaccinated individuals. The three main subvariants of the omicron variant are BA.1, BA.2, and BA.3. Initial data suggest that BA.2 might have a growth advantage over BA.1,⁴ posing a rapidly increasing threat to health systems. The omicron subvariants display remarkable differences regarding S protein mutations, particularly with respect to the N-terminal domain and the receptor-binding domain (appendix pp 2–3), which are known to harbour key epitopes of neutralising antibodies. Here, we compared BA.1, BA.2, and BA.3 for sensitivity to neutralisation by antibodies induced by infection and vaccination, using pseudoviruses as a model system, which adequately mirrors SARS-CoV-2 neutralisation by antibodies.

Cracks in the foundation: how COVID-19 showed our failures

The Lancet | 16 April 2022

Mary Basset

In 1963, James Baldwin, one of the USA's greatest essayists, published *The Fire Next Time*. The book's title comes from a slave song—"God gave Noah the rainbow sign/No more water but the fire next time". Baldwin's words sounded a warning that the USA needed to confront its racial hierarchy by embracing racial equality or doom its future. Sandro Galea's book, *The Contagion Next Time*, is titled in a homage to Baldwin and it also sounds a warning. Galea's central argument is that vulnerability to COVID-19 lies with a societal failure to recognise that the foundation of health rests on a healthy everyday life and not simply in the provision of health care. He ponders why this key lesson is not at the centre of pandemic discourse, which instead focuses on vaccination and treatment. In often lyrical prose, Galea roams across history, culture, literature, moral values, economics, politics, and personal pandemic experience. Although situated in a global context, the book's focus is the USA. Galea considers especially the enduring impacts of racism on health and the centrality of structural racism to understanding the USA.

Visualizing omicron: COVID-19 deaths vs. cases over time

PLOS ONE | 19 April 2022

Ramy Arnaout, Rima Arnaout

For most of the COVID-19 pandemic, the daily focus has been on the number of cases, and secondarily, deaths. The most recent wave was caused by the omicron variant, first identified at the end of 2021 and the dominant variant through the first part of 2022. South Africa, one of the first countries to experience and report data regarding omicron (variant 21.K), reported far fewer deaths, even as the number of reported cases rapidly eclipsed previous peaks. However, as the omicron wave has progressed, time series show that it has been markedly different from prior waves. To more readily visualize the dynamics of cases and deaths, it is natural to plot deaths per million against cases per million. Unlike the time-series plots of cases or deaths that have become daily features of pandemic updates during the pandemic, which have time as the x-axis, in a plot of deaths vs. cases, time is implicit, and is indicated in relation to the starting point. Here we present and briefly examine such plots from a number of countries and from the world as a whole, illustrating how they summarize features of the pandemic in ways that illustrate how, in most places, the omicron wave is very different from those that came before. Code for generating these plots for any country is provided in an automatically updating GitHub repository.

Cost-effectiveness of a medication event monitoring system for tuberculosis management in Morocco

PLOS ONE | 19 April 2022

Jangmi Yang, Hae-Young Kim, Seup Park, Ilham Sentissi, Nathan Green, et al

Recently, digital health technologies and management have been used to enhance adherence to TB medication. Many studies have reported that digital adherence technology (DAT) substantially improved adherence and led to cost savings up to 58% compared to traditional DOT. In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that DAT for TB treatment can be used as a substitute of traditional DOTS and recommended its implementation as part of national tuberculosis control programs (NTP). In order to scale up DAT at a national level, it is important to understand the cost-effectiveness of DAT, considering TB burden and the strategic TB program in a given setting. Furthermore, financial and case management strategies should be reassessed to accomplish the goals of global TB strategy.

Intestinal parasitic infections and associated factors among people living with HIV attending Dessie Referral Hospital, Dessie town, North-east Ethiopia: a cross-sectional study

AIDS Research and Therapy | 20 April 2022

Daniel Getacher Feleke, Abdurahaman Ali, Habtye Bisetegn and Mengaye Andualem

Intestinal parasites and HIV/AIDS co-infection become a major public health concern in Africa. The management and care of HIV/AIDS patients is being complicated by intestinal parasitic infections. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the prevalence and associated factors of intestinal parasitic infections among people living with HIV at Dessie Referral Hospital, North-east Ethiopia.

[\(Return to Top\)](#)

RECENT PUBLIC HEALTH NEWS

SA's first legal medicinal cannabis pharmacy is open for business

Sunday Times | 10 April 2022

Medical marijuana has gone mainstream, with three cannabis pharmacies opening this month — complete with their online doctor and chef. THC Pharmacy, SA's first legal cannabis pharmacy, supplies card-carrying medicinal cannabis users and is registered with the South African Pharmacy Council and the health department. THC Africa CEO Kyle Brocklebank said the pharmacy in Glenanda, Johannesburg, supplies two others, CBD Hub in Meyerton, Gauteng, and CBD Emporium in Ballito, KwaZulu-Natal. They opened this month.

Did you see your psychologist over Zoom during lockdown? Telemedicine is here to stay

Bhekisisa | 11 April 2022

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 brought rising levels of stress, anxiety and depression. But stay-at-home orders and a national emergency prompted many psychiatric and psychotherapy offices to shut down and cancel in-person appointments. The country needed a robust – and fast – transition to mental health telemedicine. And the pandemic turned out to be just the thing to make it happen.

South Africa can expect a more severe flu season this year than in 2021

Daily Maverick | 12 April 2022

Health experts expect this year's flu season in South Africa to be far less severe than flu seasons prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, but more severe than last year. The National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) says that reduced transmission of the influenza virus over the past two years has led to waning immunity against flu, and with the relaxation of Covi-19 restrictions it is likely there will be more flu cases this year compared to 2021.

GBVF: Collective efforts needed to end SA scourge

Health-E News | 12 April 2022

Gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) is a profound and widespread problem in South Africa. Given the ferocious nature of this 'pandemic', collective efforts are needed to end this scourge of violence against mostly women and children. Director-General at the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disability, Mikateko Maluleke, said government alone cannot win this fight. "Gender-based violence is a challenge. However, we are not going to throw in the towel. We need to ensure that we work together to end GBV for the sake of our children. GBV is a serious challenge but it is not the challenge for government departments only," said Maluleke.

With COVID Vaccine Supply Outstripping Vaccination Rates, Pharma Giants Question Pursuit of IP Waiver

Health Policy Watch | 13 April 2022

Pharmaceutical giants have questioned why a waiver on intellectual property (IP) rights for COVID-19 vaccines is still on the table when they are battling to find markets for their vaccines amid order cancellations – including from the Africa Centre for Disease Control. "I'm stunned that the proposed IP waiver is still being debated while supplies of vaccines are far outstripping demand and some factories

have been put to a halt because of missing orders,” Thomas Cueni, Director General of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers & Associations (IFPMA) told a media briefing on Wednesday. With almost a billion vaccines now being produced every month, countries' lack of capacity to vaccinate is now the main barrier to stopping COVID-19, added Cueni.

Floods in South Africa: protecting people must include a focus on women and girls

The Conversation | 14 April 2022

Climate change is one of the main factors contributing to recurring floods experienced in many parts of the world over the past years. In 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that emissions of greenhouse gases from human activities contributed approximately 1.1°C of global warming between 1850 and 1900. Unless drastic measures are taken to curb emissions over the next 20 years, the global temperature is expected to warm by more than 1.5°C. This implies that if extreme measures are not taken, floods will continue to wreak havoc on many regions around the world. The Durban (eThekweni) area of South Africa has experienced many floods over the recent years. They have wreaked havoc. For instance, in April 2019, a deadly flood and landslides hit the area. The region is currently reeling from what is seen as the worst flood in the history of South Africa. More than 300 people have lost their lives. There is also excessive damage to infrastructure and homes.

New Omicron sub-variants: Health dept keeping a close watch

Health-E News | 14 April

The National Department of Health is keeping an eye on developments after 23 cases of the new COVID-19 Omicron sub-variants were detected in South Africa earlier this week. Experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) are working with scientists and researchers in SA and Botswana to understand the nature of these variants, named BA.4 and BA.5. Their infectivity and virulence is especially under the spotlight with at least four people also infected in Botswana. According to the latest statistics from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), SA's positivity rate is going the wrong way. On Tuesday, it sat at 5.6%; this has since increased to 7.5% as reported last evening.

South Africa should donate its spare Covid-19 vaccines

The Mail and Guardian | 14 April 2022

The South African national department of health has revealed that 92 000 doses of its Pfizer Covid 19 vaccine expired at the end of March. These doses were worth about R13-million. In the context of our scarcity of resources, R13-million is a lot of money. In terms of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, the loss of 92 000 doses is a noticeable setback against government efforts to combat the pandemic. In future, the government could consider donating its Covid-19 vaccines before they expire. In South Africa, only roughly 40% of the population is fully vaccinated two years into the pandemic; this is primarily due to vaccine hesitancy than an inadequate supply of vaccines. Nonetheless, while vaccine hesitancy is a problem, in certain instances poor levels of vaccination is due to vaccine shortages, which are prohibitively expensive for some countries.

Positive thinking: Stop negative self-talk to reduce stress

Mayo Clinic | 15 April 2022

Is your glass half-empty or half-full? How you answer this age-old question about positive thinking may reflect your outlook on life, your attitude toward yourself, and whether you're optimistic or pessimistic — and it may even affect your health. Indeed, some studies show that personality traits such as optimism and pessimism can affect many areas of your health and well-being. The positive thinking that usually comes with optimism is a key part of effective stress management. And effective stress management is associated with many health benefits. If you tend to be pessimistic, don't despair — you can learn positive thinking skills.

How COVID added to the stresses of the most vulnerable young women in South Africa

The Conversation | 17 April 2022

By 2021, South Africa's unemployment rate was at 44%. Around 55.5% of South Africans were living in poverty. Figures show that in 2021, 10 million people, including 3 million children, lived in a household affected by hunger. Poverty is a key driver of poor mental health. People who also experience insecure income, housing and food supply are particularly vulnerable. The burden of mental illness in South Africa

is high. Nearly half of the population (47.5%) is at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder in their lifetime. Despite this high burden, access to mental healthcare in South Africa is severely limited. Only 27% of patients with severe mental illnesses receive treatment. South Africa's public health system was under-resourced and overburdened even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare in the publicly funded system is provided by 35% of the country's doctors for 84% of the population.

MHRA to look into cases of unsafe epilepsy drug being given to pregnant women

The Guardian | 17 April 2022

Regulators will investigate cases where an epilepsy drug that can cause birth defects has been prescribed without proper warnings, in light of reports that pregnant women in the UK are continuing to be given it. Sodium valproate is a drug used to treat epilepsy, and is also used in some people with bipolar disorder or migraines. However, it has been associated with a raised risk of birth defects and developmental problems if taken by pregnant women. Some unborn babies continue to be exposed to the medication: the latest figures reveal 247 women had exposed pregnancies between April 2018 and September 2021. According to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), exposure to the drug during pregnancy has declined in recent years, with a report from the valproate registry revealing that the number of pregnant women prescribed sodium valproate fell by 51% between the 2018-19 financial year and the 2020-21 financial year. But an investigation by the Sunday Times has also revealed reports of the drug being issued without information leaflets, or with warnings obscured.

Following USA – WHO Reports on Wave of Acute Childhood Hepatitis in the UK and Ireland

Health Policy Watch | 18 April 2022

The World Health Organization has reported that it is investigating some 74 cases of acute childhood hepatitis, of an unknown origin, in the United Kingdom along with five suspected and confirmed cases in the Republic of Ireland. That follows on previous reports of similar, severe hepatitis cases of an unknown origin among a cluster of nine children in the United States, as well as three children in Spain. Oddly enough, WHO's first "Disease Outbreak News (DON)" announcement of the mysterious hepatitis outbreak, which is puzzling scientists and healthcare providers, did not make any mention of the US cases already under investigation by the US Centers for Disease Control.

Latest Peer-Reviewed Study Underlines Benefits of Second COVID Booster for Older People

Health Policy Watch | 18 April 2022

The latest study on the effectiveness of a second COVID-19 booster, published last week in the New England Journal of Medicine, has shown that within a period of two weeks to one month after receiving the jab, recipients' infection rates dropped by one-half and severe cases and deaths by three-quarters. The study, conducted by Israel's Clalit Research Institute in collaboration with researchers at Harvard University in Boston, is also one of the largest studies of the fourth jab to date – analysing data of more than 364,244 individuals -182,122 who received the second booster and the same number who did not. The study also was conducted between January 3 and February 18, during the height of Israel's Omicron wave – pointing to the continued effectiveness of at least the Pfizer mRNA COVID vaccine against that new, and more infectious variant.

HIV prevention should be like fast food. This data shows why

Bhekisisa | 19 April 2022

Twenty years ago, there was very little you could do to prevent yourself from getting infected with HIV, other than to not have sex or use condoms each time you had sex. Today, the situation is very different because researchers have made great progress with something known as biomedical interventions. In easy speak, these are things such as pills, injections or vaginal rings that you can use to lower your chances of contracting HIV if you have sex without a condom. Scientists call these types of interventions pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, because you use them before you're exposed to HIV and they then help to prevent you from getting infected with the virus (prophylaxis is preventive treatment). PrEP for HIV contains antiretroviral drugs (the same medicine that doctors use to treat people infected with HIV) that shields your immune system's cells from getting infected with HIV.

In-depth: What the approval of flucytosine means for the treatment of cryptococcal

meningitis in SA

Spotlight | 19 April 2022

After seemingly endless delays, a critically important drug for the treatment of cryptococcal meningitis was recently approved in South Africa. Yet, while the approval of flucytosine was a major step forward, much more still needs to be done to ensure wide availability of this life-saving medicine for the second leading killer of people living with HIV. Catherine Tomlinson unpacks the details.

In a pandemic of medical misinformation, how do you deal with conspiracy believers?

The Guardian | 19 April 2022

Withholding judgment, appealing to critical thinking and restoring a sense of personal control are among techniques that may be helpful while speaking to people who believe in health-related conspiracy theories, experts suggest. Medical misinformation has spread widely during the coronavirus pandemic, contributing to higher Covid death rates among the unvaccinated and causing frayed relationships between friends and family members with opposing views. Writing in the Medical Journal of Australia, psychology researchers have suggested practical tips on how to talk to someone who firmly believes in health-related conspiracies. Especially during times of social unrest or uncertainty, people may turn to conspiracies to explain large-scale events, said Dr Mathew Marques, a co-author of the paper and a lecturer at La Trobe University. Conspiracy theories appeal to – but fail to satisfy – three universal psychological needs, according to the paper's authors.

CDC launches disease forecasting center to warn public of health threats

NBC News | 19 April 2022

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention launched a new center on Tuesday that aims to model and predict the path of infectious diseases like Covid, then relay that information to the public along with federal, state, and local governments. Called the Center for Forecasting and Outbreak Analytics, the subdivision of the CDC started its work in late 2021, analyzing data to anticipate the omicron variant's impact in the U.S. But the center's official launch came during a White House summit on improving the country's warning system for health threats. Officials likened the center to a kind of National Weather Service for infectious diseases. In the same way that the weather service warns people about approaching hurricanes, they said, the CFA could give people advanced notice about outbreaks.

Social entrepreneurship—a tool of self-empowerment for the LGBTI community

UNAIDS | 20 April 2022

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people has been huge. A 2020 survey of more than 20 000 LGBTI people from 138 countries showed that many had lost their jobs because of the pandemic. In addition, members of the community experienced increased discrimination, hate crimes and arrests. Criminalization combined with stigma and discrimination of LGBTI people in some countries has hindered their ability to seek essential economic and health-care support. Several of the 23 UNAIDS Solidarity Fund grantees across Brazil, Ghana, India, Madagascar and Uganda are supporting LGBTI organizations in building economic capacities and driving social impact for their respective communities through diverse social entrepreneurship projects.

Cutting-edge cancer treatment may have potential for HIV

Spotlight | 20 April 2022

On the face of it, the phrase “chimeric antigen receptors” (CARs for short) might not sound particularly exciting. But as Clive Gray, Professor of Immunology in the Division of Molecular Biology and Human Genetics at Stellenbosch University tells Spotlight, there is a lot more to this new class of immunotherapies than immediately meets the eye. For one thing, the name is derived from a fantastical hybrid monster in Greek mythology called the Chimaera – often depicted as having two heads, one of a goat and one of a lion. In The Iliad Homer describes the being as “a mingled monster of no mortal kind, Behind, a dragon's fiery tail was spread. A goat's rough body bore a lion's head, her pitchy nostrils flaky flames expire, Her gaping throat emits infernal fire.”

Health Department needs R184 million to repair 84 hospitals and clinics damaged by floods

IOL | 21 April 2022

The Health Department would need R184 million to repair 84 hospitals and clinics damaged by the floods in KwaZulu-Natal. This was revealed by the department after visits by Health Minister Dr Joe Phaahla, Deputy Minister Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo and KZN Health MEC Nomagugu Simelane, to a number of health facilities around eThekweni that were damaged.

[\(Return to Top\)](#)

TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Subscribe to the Health Systems Trust Bulletin

The Health Systems Trust (HST) produces a weekly bulletin on Fridays focusing on key public health news, peer-reviewed journal articles and other important primary healthcare resources.

Subscribe to the Health Systems Trust 60percent

HST produces a weekly online publication, 60percent, which keeps subscribers abreast with the latest news and developments pertaining to HIV-related maternal, adolescent, child and youth health. The name 60percent signifies that southern Africa is responding to a feminised HIV/AIDS epidemic, with at least 60% of those living with HIV being women. Subscribe to 60percent by simply visiting HST's website (<https://www.hst.org.za>), scroll to the bottom of the page, hit the SUBSCRIBE button, and follow the prompts. Let's keep you posted!

HSTi offers accredited and non-accredited short courses and full programmes

The Health Systems Training Institute (HSTi) is the training arm of the Health Systems Trust (HST), a leading force in the South African public health sector. HST was established in 1992, on the brink of democracy in South Africa, and has since played a significant role in strengthening the national primary health system through health research, informatics, clinical support, capacity-building and training.

[\(Return to Top\)](#)

PUBLICATIONS AND REPORTS

SEE ME AS I AM: Transgender Visibility Day

UNAIDS

Gender diversity is not just an issue for adults but for all ages including children. Gender identity is not a lifestyle choice, but an inherent right of all people. Gender stereotypes especially towards LGBTIQ lead to stigma and discrimination. This is more pronounced in children and adolescents as diversity among them is not commonly understood and society puts massive pressure on them to conform to assigned gender norms at birth. This leads to children running away from home, dropping out of school, having mental illness and being exposed to violence (including sexual violence) and denial of basic human rights and security.

[\(Return to Top\)](#)

CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

World Conference on Lung Health 2022

Date: 8 – 11 November 2022

Do you work in TB, COVID-19, air pollution, asthma, tobacco control or anything to do with lung health? Join us for the world's most sought-after event in the lung health calendar every year.

Registration for the 2022 EIS Conference is open!

Date: 2-5 May 2022

The annual EIS conference is the nation's flagship applied epidemiology conference where EIS officers

share their work in leading-edge investigations, scientific findings, and forward-thinking strategies to inform improvements in public health—all while gaining valuable presentation experience. EIS officers engage in professional networking sessions, recognition ceremonies and various learning opportunities. Free and open to the public, this conference draws a diverse attention each year from various public health sectors around the world—from epidemiology and laboratory science sleuths and public health organizations to EIS alumni, news media, and prospective applicants. Select sessions may be recorded and offered online in the months following the event.

[\(Return to Top\)](#)

JOB OPPORTUNITIES

The Health Systems Trust has no vacancies at this time.

[\(Return to Top\)](#)



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