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## ACADEMIC AND PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

### **Time to end discriminatory laws against people with HIV**

*The Lancet HIV | December 2021 edition*

*Editorial*

This World AIDS Day, UNAIDS calls for an end to the inequalities that affect people with HIV, which threaten the target to end AIDS by 2030. Countries continue to use laws to discriminate against people on the basis of their HIV status, some of which are related to travel. Restrictions can include prohibition of short-term and long-term stays, HIV testing or disclosure for entry, study, work, or residence permits, and deportation of non-nationals. In October, the New Zealand Government announced it had removed a major legal restriction on travel. HIV had been a disqualifying condition for applications for a visa to work or live in the country and has now been removed from a list of health conditions that the government considered could impose significant costs to the country's health services. This change is welcome, but long overdue.

### **Cytomegalovirus acquisition in infancy and the risk of tuberculosis disease in childhood: a longitudinal birth cohort study in Cape Town, South Africa**

*The Lancet Global Health | December 2021 edition*

Approximately 1 million children develop tuberculosis disease each year globally, half occurring in early childhood. The risk of tuberculosis disease after recent exposure is greatest before age 5 years, approaching 20% at 2 years postinfection. These high progression rates have been ascribed to an immature immune system in early life; however, the mechanisms are not well understood. The hypothesis that cytomegalovirus acquisition might increase the risk of tuberculosis disease has been posited. Cytomegalovirus infection is typically asymptomatic in childhood but most people continue to host a latent and chronic infection that might reactivate later in their lifetime. Cytomegalovirus drives immune activation and dysfunction, increasing lymphocyte-producing and cytokine-producing inflammatory T cells. Studies have shown that CD4+ T-cell activation predicts progression to tuberculosis disease. Additionally, tuberculosis disease and cytomegalovirus have similar age distributions with the greatest risk in infancy and adolescence. A case-control study found that children with tuberculosis disease had higher concentrations of cytomegalovirus-specific IFN- $\gamma$  responses. Large, population-based, prospective, cohort studies from high-burden settings such as sub-Saharan Africa with serial follow-up testing of cytomegalovirus and tuberculosis disease in infants and young children are not available, but they are

needed to further understand the pathogenesis and temporal dynamics between these two hyperendemic pathogens.

### **No more band-aids: health-care system reform**

*The Lancet Health Longevity* | 1 December 2021

*Editorial*

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen health-care systems around the world crippled by overburdening, which is now compounded by a mass exodus of personnel due to vaccination refusal. Many countries have mandated vaccination for health-care workers, with those refusing left without a job. After this mandate went into effect in France in September, 2021, 3000 health-care workers were suspended for not complying. Although this affects all health-care sectors, this sudden dearth of employees has taken a particular toll on the care of older adults—an already underfunded sector plagued by high staff turnover and access barriers for patients. The UK mandate of double jobs for all care home employees, with a deadline of Nov 11, 2021, is expected to result in approximately 50 000 vacancies, leading not only to diminished care of existing residents but to an inability in accommodating referrals from primary care.

### **Role of asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic infections in covid-19 pandemic**

*The BMJ* | 1 December 2021

*Wenjing Gao, Jun Lv, Yuanjie Pang, Li-Ming Li*

Asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission seems to be one of the most important features of covid-19. People without symptoms can transmit the virus, but estimating their influence on outbreaks is challenging. Whether asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic infections (box 1) act as “silent triggers” of covid-19 transmission remains controversial. In the UK, for example, a failure to integrate testing programmes into clinical care has made it difficult to evaluate the role of asymptomatic carriers in transmission. In contrast to many other countries, China has been releasing data on new asymptomatic cases of covid-19 and those who eventually developed symptoms since 31 March 2020. This has facilitated assessment of the role of asymptomatic infections in disease transmission. We examine the proportion and infectivity of people with asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic infections, and how their management can contribute to controlling covid-19 transmission.

### **Peer- and community-led responses to HIV: A scoping review**

*Plos One* | 1 December 2021

*George Ayala, Laurel Sprague, Leigh-Ann van der Merwe, Ruth Thomas, Judy Chang, et al.*

In June 2021, United Nations (UN) Member States committed to ambitious targets for scaling up community-led responses by 2025 toward meeting the goals of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. These targets build on UN Member States 2016 commitments to ensure that 30% of HIV testing and treatment programmes are community-led by 2030. At its current pace, the world is not likely to meet these nor other global HIV targets, as evidenced by current epidemiologic trends. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further slow momentum made to date. The purpose of this paper is to review available evidence on the comparative advantages of community-led HIV responses that can better inform policy making towards getting the world back on track.

### **Factors Associated With COVID-19 Vaccine Receipt by Health Care Personnel at a Major Academic Hospital During the First Months of Vaccine Availability**

*JAMA Network Open* | 1 December 2021

*Judith Green-Mckenzie, Frances Shofer, Florence Momplaisir, et al*

The first vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 virus was granted emergency use authorization in the US and became available for use on December 11, 2020.<sup>1</sup> This Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine was deployed to the US population through local, regional, territorial, and state departments of health in a tiered manner using a priority group system, based on recommendations of the federal Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. Issues considered for the prioritization included the risk of exposure and likelihood of severe disease. The Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention recommended vaccines be distributed using a phased system with 4 priority groups: phases 1a, 1b, 1c, and 2. Health care personnel (HCP) were in phase 1a.

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## RECENT PUBLIC HEALTH NEWS

### HPV: What is happening with SA's other relatively new vaccine programme?

*Spotlight | 24 November 2021*

In February 2021, Irene Banda was diagnosed with late-stage cervical cancer. Doctors at Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital in Johannesburg confirmed the diagnosis and told her she would need treatment. But they couldn't give her that treatment yet. Banda says she was told to go home and wait. So she did. Without any contact from her doctors, she waited until September, when she began to experience uncontrollable bleeding. "I was bleeding so much, I had no energy left in my body. I felt I was just waiting to die," the 47-year-old tells Spotlight. In August, Banda was admitted to Charlotte Maxeke Hospital where she was given a blood transfusion. "When I asked them what will happen to me now, they told me to go back home and wait," she says.

### Update on Omicron

*World Health Organization | 28 November 2021*

On 26 November 2021, WHO designated the variant B.1.1.529 a variant of concern, named Omicron, on the advice of WHO's Technical Advisory Group on Virus Evolution (TAG-VE). This decision was based on the evidence presented to the TAG-VE that Omicron has several mutations that may have an impact on how it behaves, for example, on how easily it spreads or the severity of illness it causes. Here is a summary of what is currently known.

### Male circumcisions disrupted by COVID-19, fall short of the 2020 target

*UNAIDS | 29 November 2021*

In areas with high HIV prevalence and low rates of male circumcision, voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) can greatly contribute to HIV prevention. Despite this, there was a steep drop in the number of VMCMCs performed in the 15 priority countries in 2020, due mainly to service disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: approximately 2.8 million procedures were performed in 2020, compared with 4.1 million in 2019.

### Joint Statement on Dose Donations of COVID-19 Vaccines to African Countries

*World Health Organization | 29 November 2021*

Building on lessons learned from our collective experience with dose donations over the past several months, the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT), the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) and COVAX wish to draw the attention of the international community to the situation of donations of COVID-19 vaccines to Africa, and other COVAX participating economies, particularly those supported by the Gavi COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC).

### Omicron's message: We need a combined strategy to treat AIDS and vaccinate against Covid

*Daily Maverick | 30 November 2021*

Despite all the hue, cry and feigned surprise about Omicron, the latest Covid variant, its appearance was as inevitable as the knowledge that unsafe sex can lead to HIV infection, that tobacco causes cancer, or alcohol abuse fills our trauma wards. There is something terrible and tragically predictable about the way the concurrent crises are unfolding in South Africa and the world. We live in a world that, through research, is blessed with scientific knowledge and evidence that explains disease and disaster. But we also live in a world where a combination of political paralysis and vested interests in the status quo – however deadly it is to humanity – means we can't act on it.

### Opinion: Funding must be allocated to treat drivers of HIV

*Spotlight | 30 November 2021*

On this World AIDS Day (December 1st), South Africa still has the world's largest HIV burden, with 7.7 million people currently living with HIV amid a shrinking HIV budget. Following the November 2021 Medium Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS), civil society organisations have raised concerns that diminished funding to provinces, both through the equitable share and through conditional grants, may result in crucial HIV/AIDS targets being missed. National Treasury has also failed to provide clear information or concrete plans to assist provinces to meet their HIV programme targets amidst these budget constraints.

## **Despite reports of milder symptoms Omicron should not be underestimated**

*The Guardian | 30 November 2021*

As the world scrambles to contain the new variant, some are hopefully seizing on anecdotal reports from South Africa that it may cause only mild illness. But although previous variants of the coronavirus have been associated with different symptoms and severity, it would be dangerous to assume that Omicron is a viral pussy cat, experts say.

## **Covid-19: Omicron, fourth wave – experts plead with health workers to get their J&J booster shots**

*News24 | 1 December 2021*

Healthcare workers in South Africa are strongly encouraged to get their booster shots of the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) Covid-19 vaccine as South Africa heads into its fourth wave of infections. Covid-19 cases have been rapidly increasing in certain parts of the country. This, after the Department of Health and scientists announced the detection of a new variant of concern, Omicron, last week. Speaking to Health24, Professor Linda-Gail Bekker, co-investigator of the Sisonke 1 and 2 trials, said a booster dose would make a significant difference and give immune systems a leg up. "What we know is that the single dose works very well to protect against disease and death. But this additional dose really gives a top up in protection," she said.

## **Daily vaccination rate rockets while Covid-19 cases double**

*BusinessTime | 1 December 2021*

The possibility of expanded mandatory vaccination policies at businesses and educational institutions is already having an impact, with SA's flagging inoculation drive getting a boost of almost 60% on Tuesday. Health department attributes surge in Covid immunisation to roll out of booster shots for healthcare workers and decline in vaccine hesitancy as Omicron variant takes hold. The possibility of expanded mandatory vaccination policies at businesses and educational institutions is already having an impact, with SA's flagging inoculation drive getting a boost of almost 60% on Tuesday. While still well below the government's target of 250,000 a day, the latest data from the health department's Covid-19 portal, showed that 175,395 people were vaccinated in the 24 hours to 5pm on Tuesday, up from the previous daily average of about 110,000 — an increase of 59.5%. This came two days after President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that a task team had been set up to look into vaccine mandates for certain activities and locations.

## **Vaccine passports may start in early 2022**

*Business Day | 1 December 2021*

Unvaccinated South Africans could face restrictions on being able to access public services and places of employment as soon as the beginning of 2022 after the discovery of a new variant and SA's exclusion from international travel brought further urgency to debates about mandatory vaccination.

## **World AIDS Day 2021 - Step up, be bold, end AIDS, end inequalities and end pandemics**

*WHO | 1 December 2021*

With millions of lives on the line, UNAIDS and WHO World AIDS Day event saw global partners, including Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, urgently call for expanded access to health treatments and technologies and for human rights to be upheld. On the occasion of World AIDS Day 2021, UNAIDS, the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners came together at a special event in Geneva, Switzerland, to highlight the urgent need to end the economic, social, cultural and legal inequalities that drive the AIDS pandemic and other pandemics around the world. "We are issuing an urgent warning. Only by moving fast to end the inequalities that drive the AIDS pandemic can we overcome it," said Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of UNAIDS.

## **Omicron was in Britain BEFORE South Africa raised alarm: Nine Scottish cases all linked to single 'event' on November 20**

*Daily Mail | 1 December 2021*

Omicron was in the UK days before South Africa warned the world of the new Covid variant, it has emerged after the majority of cases in Scotland were linked to a single 'event' on November 20. Nicola Sturgeon revealed that nine of Scotland's 10 cases were traced back to a 'single private' event four days

before South African doctors raised the alarm about the super-mutant strain. The first minister told MSPs that all nine were tested on around November 23 and their samples later analysed for the new variant. They were all based in the Glasgow and Clyde and Lanarkshire area and none had any travel links. The lack of links abroad has raised questions are being raised about whether the variant may have been imported into the country at the COP26 climate summit, which was held in Glasgow in the first fortnight of the month, or at the Scotland v South Africa rugby match at Murrayfield in Edinburgh on 13 November.

### **World AIDS Day 2021 message from UNAIDS Executive Director Winnie Byanyima**

*UNAIDS | 1 December 2021*

Dear friends,

Greetings on this World AIDS Day, and my solidarity with all around the world as we confront the impact of colliding pandemics. This year, the world agreed on a bold plan that, if leaders fulfil it, will end AIDS by 2030. That's so exciting. But today we, as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, issue a stark warning. AIDS remains a pandemic, the red light is flashing and only by moving fast to end the inequalities that drive the pandemic can we overcome it. Where leaders are acting boldly and together, bringing together cutting-edge science, delivering services that meet all people's needs, protecting human rights and sustaining adequate financing, AIDS-related deaths and new HIV infections are becoming rare.

### **Pfizer and Merck in talks to offer Covid-19 pills in South Africa**

*BusinessTech | 2 December 2021*

South Africa is in talks with Pfizer and Merck to gain access to their Covid-19 treatment pills as the omicron variant spreads across the country and cases almost double. The country wants one of them to potentially produce the therapeutics in South Africa, Nicholas Crisp, deputy director-general in South Africa's Department of Health, said in response to a lawmaker's question on Wednesday. "We are discussing those two and other matters with manufacturers so that we understand what it is they are selling, what it does," he said.

### **Every member of society is obliged to report gender-based violence, says advocate**

*IOL | 2 December 2021*

The 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children Campaign is a UN campaign to challenge violence against women and children (GBV). It runs every year from November 25 until December 10 and includes the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, World Aids Day and the International Day for Persons with Disabilities. The 16 Days period forms the centre point of the government's view of 365 Days of Activism. It is not only during the 16 Days campaign that the team at Wynberg court and Heideveld Thuthuzela Care Centre address the scourge of gender-based violence (GBV) but deals with the accountability of these offences on a daily basis.

### **Covid-19: More than 6 000 new infections in Gauteng, as 8 561 new cases detected nationally**

*News24 | 2 December 2021*

More than 6 000 new Covid-19 infections have been recorded in Gauteng, with a total of 8 561 new confirmed cases of Covid-19 being recorded countrywide on Wednesday. This compared to the 4 373 cases on Tuesday. According to a statement by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), as of Wednesday, the country recorded 2 976 613 laboratory-confirmed cases. There have been 28 new Covid-19 deaths, bringing the confirmed death toll to 89 871.

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## **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.

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## **PUBLICATIONS AND REPORTS**

### **2021 World AIDS Day report — Unequal, unprepared, under threat: why bold action against inequalities is needed to end AIDS, stop COVID-19 and prepare for future pandemics**

*UNAIDS | 29 November 2021*

UNAIDS issued a stark warning today that if leaders fail to tackle inequalities the world could face 7.7 million\* AIDS-related deaths over the next 10 years. UNAIDS further warns that if the transformative measures needed to end AIDS are not taken, the world will also stay trapped in the COVID-19 crisis and remain dangerously unprepared for the pandemics to come.

### **A pocket guide to HIV management and South Africa**

*Cipla | 2 December 2021*

This useful resource features the evolution of antiretroviral drugs, looks at the history of HIV in this country, to the latest clinical guidelines in managing the condition. We bring you key recent guidelines update for ART in adults, updated dolutegravir recommendations and how to navigate prevention of HIV, among other important aspects.

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## **CONFERENCES AND EVENTS**

### **Virtual meeting – WHO Pandemic Ethics & Policy Summit**

Date: 6 December

Time: 13:00 – 17:30 CET

From resource allocation and priority-setting, access to vaccines, vaccine mandates, lockdowns, travel restrictions, public health surveillance, and obligations to conduct clinical trials, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised profound ethical challenges on an unprecedented global scale. At the same time, and also in an unprecedented manner, ethical values like equity, fairness, solidarity, and trust have figured prominently in global political discussions. Despite an abundance of guidance, the question remains: how much progress, if any, have we made in achieving these values, in advancing towards global health justice? Much has been said about the importance of evidence-informed decision-making, but what have we achieved in terms of 'Ethics-informed decision-making'? This Summit provides a forum to discuss the translation of ethics into policy making in COVID-19; where we have succeeded and failed; what are the major challenges and what steps need to be taken to improve ethics informed public health decision-making for pandemic preparedness and response. The Summit is organized by the WHO Health Ethics and Governance Unit in collaboration with the WHO's Working Group on Ethics & COVID-19 and the ACT-Accelerator Ethics & Governance Working Group.

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## JOB OPPORTUNITIES

### HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING (HSS): Health Information (HIT) Technicians (3)

Closing Date: 6 December 2021

### HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING (HSS): Area Co-ordinators (2)

Closing Date: 6 December 2021

### HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING (HSS): Operations Manager – SA Sure project

Closing Date: 7 December 2021

### HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING (HSS): Clinical Laboratory Advisors (5)

Closing Date: 7 December 2021

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