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ACADEMIC AND PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

Prevalence of overweight and obesity among school children and parents: a cross-sectional study

Rural and Remote Health | 18 November 2021

Hatice Nilden Arslan, Cihad Dundar, Özlem Terzi

Obesity, a complex and multifactorial disease causing severe health problems, is still the second most important cause of preventable deaths after smoking. Another risk is that childhood obesity is associated with overweight and obesity in adulthood. This study provides information on the prevalence of overweight and obesity in primary school students and their parents on location (rural v urban) and gender.

Africa: tackle HIV and COVID-19 together

Nature | 1 December 2021

N Msomi, R Lessells, K Mlisana and T de Oliveira

Failure to get COVID-19 vaccines to nations with high rates of uncontrolled advanced HIV puts people living with that virus at even greater risk, and could drive the emergence of coronavirus variants. As scientists and clinical practitioners working in hospitals and laboratories across South Africa, we've seen at first hand the devastation that COVID-19 has brought to the country. Many of our colleagues (including leading scientists and health-care professionals) have died. We have also seen how much harder it has become for people with HIV to get treatment and monitoring, which has meant more people being admitted to hospital with serious illnesses such as tuberculosis and cryptococcal meningitis.

Effect of COVID-19 on HIV, tuberculosis, and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV indicators in Mopani district, South Africa

South African Medical Journal | 3 December 2021

C Mutyambizi, J Dunlop, C Maluleke, L Ranoto, T Chetty, et al.

Background. To prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, many countries instituted lockdown measures. As the virus was initially slow to spread to rural areas in South Africa, Mopani district in Limpopo Province did not experience a high incidence of COVID-19 until the second wave in December 2020. Until then, lockdown measures were more likely than SARS-CoV-2 infections to have an adverse impact on health services.

Objectives. To analyse HIV, tuberculosis (TB) and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV

(PMTCT) indicator trends in Mopani during the COVID-19 lockdown and two COVID-19 waves. Methods. Using monthly data from the District Health Information System from February 2019 to December 2020, we conducted a retrospective review of data elements and indicators that fall into the following domains: primary healthcare head count (HC), HIV, antiretroviral treatment (ART), PMTCT and TB. Aggregated data were analysed, and an interrupted time series analysis was conducted. We assessed percentage changes between the January - March 2020 and April - June 2020 periods, and differences in means for the period April - December 2019 v. the period April - December 2020 were assessed for statistical significance.

Omicron SARS-CoV-2 variant: a new chapter in the COVID-19 pandemic

The Lancet | 3 December 2021

Salim Abdool Karim and Quarraisha Abdool Karim

On Nov 25, 2021, about 23 months since the first reported case of COVID-19 and after a global estimated 260 million cases and 5.2 million deaths, a new SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern (VoC), omicron, was reported. Omicron emerged in a COVID-19-weary world in which anger and frustration with the pandemic are rife amid widespread negative impacts on social, mental, and economic wellbeing. Although previous VoCs emerged in a world in which natural immunity from COVID-19 infections was common, this fifth VoC has emerged at a time when vaccine immunity is increasing in the world.

Neuropsychological functioning and cognitive reserve in newly HIV diagnosed antiretroviral-naïve South African adults from peri-urban and informal settlements

Plos One | 7 December 2021

Kalpesh Narsi, Andrew Tomita, Suvira Ramlall

Despite lower incidences of HIV-associated dementia due to antiretroviral therapy, neuropsychological impairment (NPI) remains a persistent challenge in sub-Saharan Africa. Improving cognitive reserve (CR) can mitigate NPI, but there are few investigations on neuropsychological (NP) performance, and its association with CR in newly diagnosed ART-naïve HIV-positive individuals to inform early treatment strategies. A comprehensive battery of tests were administered to assess various NP domains (International HIV Dementia Scale [for memory, motor speed, psychomotor speed], Digit Span Test [for attention], Action Fluency Test [for language] and Clock Drawing Test [for executive/visuospatial function]), and CR (using Cognitive Reserve Index Questionnaire) among 211 newly diagnosed ART-naïve HIV-positive participants from two clinics that serve peri-urban and informal settlement communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Dried blood spot specimens for SARS-CoV-2 antibody testing: A multi-site, multi-assay comparison

Plos One | 7 December 2021

François Cholette, Christine Mesa, Angela Harris, Hannah Ellis, Karla Cachero, et al.

The true severity of infection due to COVID-19 is under-represented because it is based on only those who are tested. Although nucleic acid amplifications tests (NAAT) are the gold standard for COVID-19 diagnostic testing, serological assays provide better population-level SARS-CoV-2 prevalence estimates. Implementing large sero-surveys present several logistical challenges within Canada due its unique geography including rural and remote communities. Dried blood spot (DBS) sampling is a practical solution but comparative performance data on SARS-CoV-2 serological tests using DBS is currently lacking. Here we present test performance data from a well-characterized SARS-CoV-2 DBS panel sent to laboratories across Canada representing 10 commercial and 2 in-house developed tests for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies. Three commercial assays identified all positive and negative DBS correctly corresponding to a sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value of 100% (95% CI = 72.2, 100). Two in-house assays also performed equally well. In contrast, several commercial assays could not achieve a sensitivity greater than 40% or a negative predictive value greater than 60%. Our findings represent the foundation for future validation studies on DBS specimens that will play a central role in strengthening Canada's public health policy in response to COVID-19.

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RECENT PUBLIC HEALTH NEWS

As Antiviral Pills Arrive, Can Testing Keep Up?

The New York Times | 29 November 2021

Before the end of the year, Americans who contract the coronavirus may be able to purchase an effective treatment on a trip to their neighborhood pharmacy. Two new antiviral pills — both of which have shown promise in preventing hospitalizations and deaths in people at high risk for severe Covid-19 — are currently being reviewed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. One of the drugs, developed by the pharmaceutical company Merck, could receive emergency authorization as early as this week. Another, made by Pfizer, is likely to be close behind.

Punishing South Africa will harm global pandemic response

The Times | 29 November 2021

As the world reels from the past 23 months of the Covid-19 pandemic, South African scientists reported a new Covid-19 variant on November 24 2021. This announcement introduced the world to Omicron, as the variant was named two days later by the World Health Organisation. Concerned that the new variant had mutations that may increase its infectiousness and may enable it to escape vaccine immunity, created a new uncertainty in the pandemic. In the midst of this anxiety, the world needed to build bridges to work together in dealing with this mutating foe but instead some choose to build barriers and punish southern African countries with travel bans. Omicron has arrived at a tumultuous time.

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

World Health Organization | 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. “World leaders must work together urgently to tackle the challenges head-on. I urge you: be courageous in matching words with deeds. It is outrageous that every minute that passes, we lose a precious life to AIDS. We don't have time to waste.”

Letter from Prince Harry to Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Ms Winnie Byanyima on World AIDS Day

UNAIDS | 1 December 2021

On this World AIDS Day we recognise the 40 years that have shaped life for many. We honour those whose lives have been cut short and reaffirm our commitment to a scientific community that has worked tirelessly against this disease. My mother would be deeply grateful for everything you stand for and have accomplished. We all share that gratitude, so thank you. It is striking to now see the world's leading AIDS activists are also leading the call for COVID-19 vaccine equity. Vaccinating the world is a test of our moral character and we are experiencing a spectacular failure when it comes to global vaccine equity. Similar to the AIDS crisis, we've yet again revealed over the past year, that the value of life depends on whether you were born and/or live in a rich nation, or a developing country. We've known for some time (thanks to medical experts) that if we are unable to meet agreed targets to vaccinate 40% of every country's population by the end of the year, and 70% by next September, potentially more dangerous COVID-19 variants are likely to arise. Yet, here we are.

Are two medicines instead of three the future of HIV treatment?

Spotlight | 1 December 2021

The medicines available for the treatment of HIV infection in the public sector in South Africa have changed significantly over the years. But one thing that hasn't changed is that the standard treatment is made up of three different antiretrovirals (ARVs)- even if they come co-formulated in one pill. The discovery of triple therapy for the treatment of HIV back in the 1990s turned HIV from a death sentence into a manageable disease. The triple was critical, since people who only took one or two ARVs soon developed drug resistance and fell sick again. The idea that you need three ARVs accordingly became one of the cornerstones of HIV treatment for the quarter-century since. But, as discussed at the recent

2021 Southern African HIV Clinicians Society (SAHCS) conference, the era of exclusive triple therapy may be coming to an end as evidence mounts in support of the safety and efficacy of new dual therapy (two-drug) regimens.

Opinion: We should make it much easier for people to start and stay on HIV treatment

Spotlight | 1 December 2021

For some years now, our top-line conclusions when looking at South Africa's HIV statistics have been reasonably consistent. We are doing well at testing people, and if people who are living with HIV start and stay on treatment, they mostly stay healthy and the virus is suppressed to undetectable levels in their bodies. The problem is that many people who test positive either never start treatment or start but then stop. So, the top priority in our HIV programme should be to make it as easy as possible for people to start and stay on treatment. Yet, as a number of excellent provincial reports released this year by community healthcare monitoring group Ritshidze have shown, there are many healthcare system factors that work directly against this objective.

The Free State Health department has expressed concern at reports of patients throwing away their antiretroviral (ARV) treatment

Health E-News | 2 December 2021

Almost 2,000 people defaulting on their treatment in the province, which is an increase from last year, provincial spokesperson Mondli Mvambi told Health-e News. Last year 1457 people defaulted on their treatment in the province. Mvambi said it was concerning that not only were people defaulting but they were also throwing away the medication. "We do have cases of patients defaulting with treatments but throwing away treatments is bad because it's robbing others who need them."

Over 680 000 South Africans queue for Covid jabs this week, as 4th wave circles and Omicron variant spreads

IOL | 3 December 2021

As news of the omicron variant and a fourth wave of Covid-19 infections looming reached the ears of South Africans, over 680 000 citizens went for their jabs this week. According to the National Department of Health's dashboard, from Sunday, November 28, until Thursday, December 2, a total 685 133 South Africans got their jabs. During this period of those vaccinated 55.72% were women and 44.73% were men. This success came after President Cyril Rampaphosa called for those not vaccinated to go for their jabs as daily Covid-19 infections increased. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has reported Gauteng province to be the epicentre of the latest infections to hit the country.

#ACTogether campaign to promote access to COVID-19 tools during FIFA Arab Cup™

World Health Organization | 3 December 2021

Using the platform of the first FIFA Arab Cup™, the World Health Organization (WHO), FIFA and the Qatari authorities are launching the #ACTogether campaign to call for teamwork and unity to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and tests. A large proportion of the global population remains susceptible to infection and at an increased risk of severe disease and death. Vaccine inequity persists in many parts of the world; of the nearly 7.5 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines administered globally by mid-November 2021, only 0.6% had been administered in low-income countries. The WHO is emphasizing the need to scale up access to vaccines, treatments and diagnostics, through support to the global Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator equity initiative, as well as the importance of strict adherence to public health measures. FIFA will utilize football's substantial platform during the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2021™ with a series of videos for broadcast, both in-stadium and around Doha. Team captains will also show their support for the message, while each participating member association will have assets to share with its fans via its social and digital platforms. The #ACTogether awareness initiative was first rolled out during the last edition of the FIFA Club World Cup™ in Qatar in February 2021 and its latest iteration stresses that the COVID-19 pandemic is not over.

Shelters: Access not a given for LGBTQIA+ members

Health E-News | 3 December 2021

The Human Rights Watch Organization (HRW) revealed that shelters differ in whom they accept as

residents, meaning many groups, like members of the LGBTQIA+ community, are excluded from having a roof over their heads. Groups like undocumented migrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and women with older male children, were sometimes denied access. Reasons for their exclusion include fears over breaching immigration laws or not being able to cover expenses for non-nationals. Older women, people who use drugs, and women with severe illnesses were sometimes excluded as well, with many facilities lacking the resources to provide specialized health or services. The HRW defends the rights of people in 100 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice. This particular study was conducted to improve shelter funding and access.

More children under five being hospitalised

Health E-News | 3 December 2021

Pfizer is expected to make an application to SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) early next year to have its COVID-19 vaccine administered to children under 12. This emerged during the National Health Department's update on South Africa's preparations for the fourth wave of COVID-19. Health authorities have noticed a sharp increase in the number of children affected by COVID-19 in this wave, Dr. Wassila Jassat, Public Health Specialist at the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) said on Friday. "There has been an increase in hospital admissions of those under five. This could be due to an immunity gap as more adults are vaccinated, children are susceptible," said Jassat.

Why all children older than 12 need to get the Covid-19 jab

Daily Maverick | 3 December 2021

On 10 September 2021, the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority approved the use of the Pfizer vaccine for children 12 years and older. This approval was followed by Minister of Health Joe Phaahla announcing that the government had opened Covid-19 vaccinations to children in this age group. However, uptake among these children has been quite low. There seems to be resistance from some quarters, including parents and healthcare workers. More recently, the African Christian Democratic Party, supported by some organisations, asked the courts to issue an interdict to stop the roll-out of Covid-19 vaccinations to children. The Pretoria High Court ruled that the application was not urgent and could be heard at a later stage.

Dealing with uncertainty about the Omicron variant

The Guardian | 5 December 2021

The race is on to understand the new variant identified by scientists in South Africa and Botswana, dubbed Omicron (the next Greek letter was "nu", but this could have been mistaken for "new"). Fears include greater spread, worse disease or reduced effectiveness of treatments and vaccines. Increased transmission can arise from two factors. First, there is an intrinsic advantage, with a heightened "basic reproduction number" R_0 ; in a susceptible population, that is the average number of people each case infects, although after 20 months of pandemic this has become a notional concept. It was around 3 for the original wild-type virus, compared to around 6 for Delta and possibly rather more for Omicron.

Omicron found in five provinces: Health department awaits approval of vaccine booster shots

Daily Maverick | 6 December 2021

The National Department of Health has indicated that it could "possibly" start a rollout of Covid-19 booster shots to the public this year, if it gets approval from the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (Sahpra) in time. Spokesperson Foster Mohale said on Monday the department could start the booster roll-out this year if approval comes through. He had previously said it would not happen before the conclusion of the Sisonke roll-out of boosters for health workers on 15 December.

Vaccine mandates: 'Important public health interventions by government'

Health E-News | 6 December 2021

Vaccine mandates create situations that compel people to get vaccinated by limiting their access to particular services or activities, but still leave individuals with the choice to get vaccinated or not. COVID-19 vaccine mandates should be considered important and effective public health interventions by government, but individuals would still have a choice whether to get vaccinated or not, says public health lawyer Safura Abdool Karim. "Vaccine mandates don't mean you are necessarily forced but refer to any type of policy law or regulation that creates situations for people to get vaccinated by either limiting their

access to particular services, or preventing them from doing or engaging in certain kinds of activities if they are not vaccinated,” she explains.

Mabuza: HIV/AIDS and Covid-19 Show That We Need to Strengthen Our Health Systems

EWN | 7 December 2021

Deputy President David Mabuza said the COVID-19 and HIV & Aids pandemics should be a lesson for countries to create much stronger health systems to handle any diseases and viruses. Mabuza, in his capacity as the chairperson of the South African National Aids Council and acting president, officially opened the International Conference on Aids and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA) in Durban on Monday night.

Mia Malan | The joke's on us, South Africa. The cruel logic of Omicron travel bans – debunked

News24 | 8 December 2021

Last week, on a late afternoon, panic consumed Tulio de Oliveira, the scientist who led the team of South African scientists that identified the new Omicron Covid variant in the country two weeks ago. He was rapidly running out of reagents, the chemicals needed to sequence genomes of positive test results to identify new cases of the variant. South Africa's new SARS-CoV-2 infections had almost doubled from the previous day (it has since increased 15-fold) and the number of positive test results to analyse was increasing at speed. But two days after the announcement of his team's results, De Oliveira's means of importing the chemicals, which he needed to help his country keep track of the Omicron variant, had been blocked by the nations who stock them.

Pfizer vaccine provides partial protection against Omicron: South Africa study

BusinessTech | 8 December 2021

Omicron's ability to evade vaccine and infection-induced immunity is “robust but not complete,” said the research head of a laboratory at the Africa Health Research Institute in South Africa.

In the first reported experiments gauging the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines against the worrisome new strain, researchers at the institute found that the variant could partially evade the vaccine produced by Pfizer and BioNTech. Still, its evasion wasn't complete and a booster shot could provide additional protection, Alex Sigal said in an online presentation on Tuesday.

Battleground set for mandatory vaccines in South Africa

BusinessTech | 8 December 2021

South Africa's Constitutional Court is set to be one of the critical decision-makers around introducing mandatory Covid-19 vaccines in South Africa, with several groups announcing plans this week to approach the country's apex court for clarity. The South African Federation of Trade Unions (Safu) says it will embark on a mass campaign to encourage workers to vaccinate, but opposes the introduction of vaccine mandates at workplaces and other sites. In a briefing on Monday (6 December), the country's second-largest trade federation said it opposed mandatory vaccines, citing Constitutional concerns. It added that it plans to approach the country's highest court for clarity on the issue.

SA's Life Expectancy Down from 65.5 On Average To 62 Years Due To Covid

News24 | 9 December 2021

The Department of Social Development has reported a decrease in life expectancy for South Africans due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The department was presenting at a Brics webinar focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on the population and development. South Africa has surpassed the 90,000 mark in terms of fatalities from the virus. Social development's chief director of population and development Jacques van Zuydam said this had an impact on the country's death rate and life expectancy.

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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

World Malaria Report

This year's World malaria report surveys the extent of damage wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic to the global malaria response, and outlines what is needed to get back on track and accelerate progress in the fight against one of our oldest and most deadly diseases. There were an estimated 14 million more malaria cases and 47 000 more deaths in 2020 compared to 2019, due to disruptions to services during the pandemic. However, things could have been far worse if not for the efforts of malaria endemic countries to maintain services. Even before the pandemic, global progress against malaria had levelled off, and countries with a high burden of the disease were losing ground. Since 2015, the baseline of WHO's global malaria strategy, 24 nations have registered increases in malaria mortality. Now, critical 2020 milestones of WHO's global malaria strategy have been missed, and without immediate and dramatic action, the 2030 targets will not be met.

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CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

WHO Global Competency Standards for Refugee and Migrant Health Services – Strengthening the health workforce to provide quality health services to refugees and migrants

Date: 16 December 2021

Time: 15:00

Refugees and migrants may face a number of challenges to accessing health care, including language and cultural differences, institutional discrimination and restricted use of health services, which shape their interactions with the host country's health system and health workforce. The health workforce has a vital role in providing people-centred health services and building the resilience of health systems to respond to the health needs of refugees and migrants. This requires health workers with specific competencies.

Register here: https://who.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_4-arcfhSTOS82XtgTvbIRg

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JOB OPPORTUNITIES

HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING: Pharmacist

Closing Date: 15 December 2021

HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING: Facility Team Leaders (2)

Closing Date: 17 December 2021

HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING: Area Monitoring and Evaluation Officer

Closing Date: 22 December 2021

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