

Covid-19: Scientists warn that it's not over till it's over

Mask mandates are now over, but health practitioners and scientists say it's time to use what we have learnt about Covid-19 to manage other epidemics. Credit: IMF Photo/James Oatway

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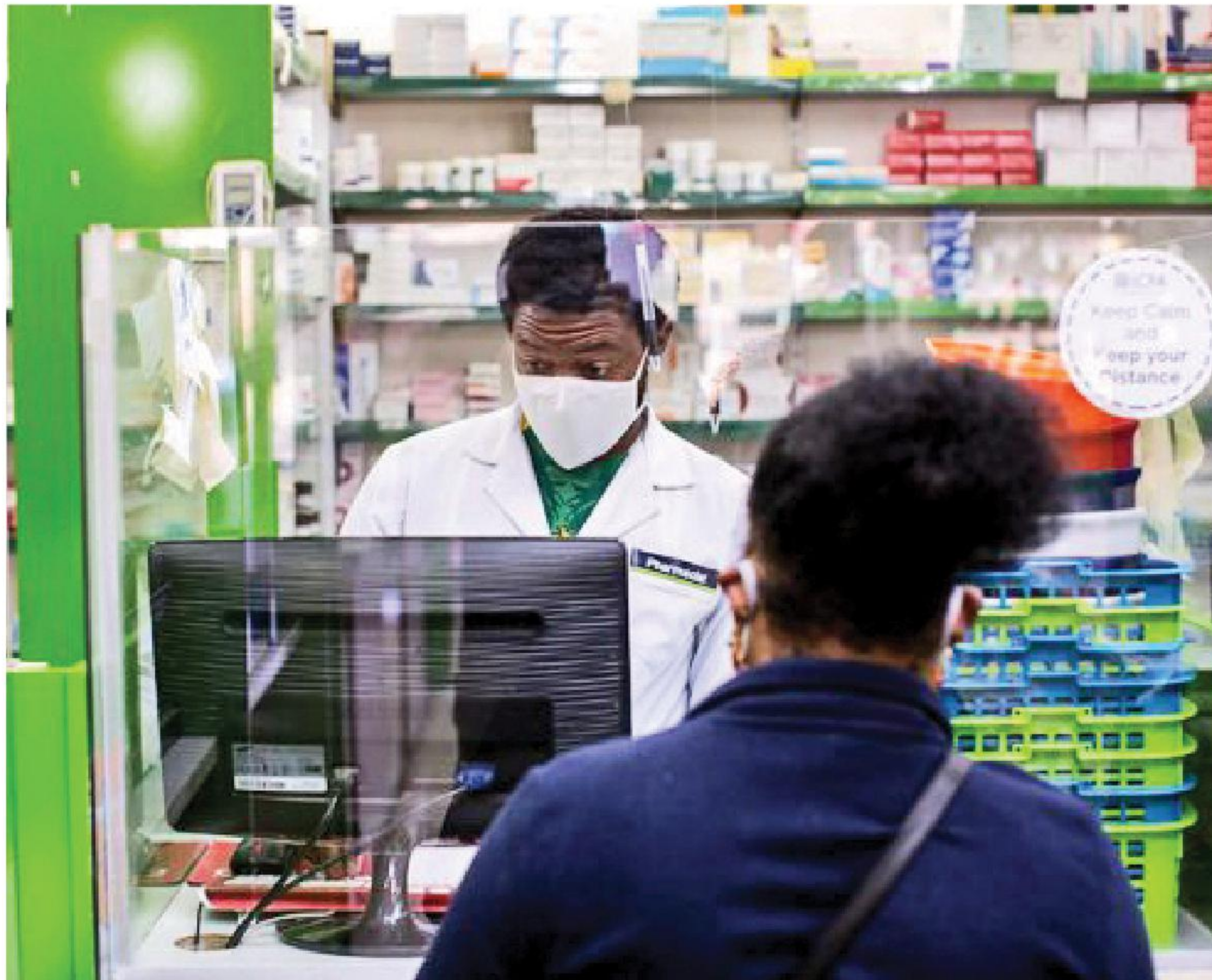
Johannesburg, Aug 18 2022 (IPS) - After two years of economic and social upheaval caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries, including South Africa, have lifted the tough protocols such as lockdowns, the mandatory wearing of masks and social distancing.

Covid fatigue, the global economic bloodbath, devastating social and mental health impacts, and the hope that large-scale vaccinations provided sufficient herd immunity, persuaded these governments to lift the suffocating protocols.

But experts warn that we should not be lulled into a false sense of security.

According to the Statista Research Service, outbreaks of Covid-19 continue to be confirmed in almost every country in the world. The virus has infected nearly 566 million people worldwide, with the number of deaths at almost 6.4 million. The most severely affected countries include the US, India, Brazil, France and Germany.

Thankfully, the deadly Delta variant is no longer a significant threat. The emergence of Omicron, which is more easily transmitted, has raised concern among scientists because it constantly mutates, as evident from its swift evolution from the BA.2 lineage to Omicron.B4 and B5.



Dr Waasila Jassat of the South African National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) says that South Africa has a high number of Omicron cases but fortunately experienced only a small rise in hospitalisations and deaths during its BA.4 and BA.5 wave. Quoted in the scientific journal Nature, she warns that older adults are still at high risk and that the new strains are more immune to vaccinations.

A panel of experts at a recent webinar in Johannesburg, titled: "Is Covid 19 over? Or is it still lurking in the

shadows? An African response to the pandemic", expressed concern at the unknowns related to the mutating nature of Omicron.

They reviewed the devastating impact of the lockdown measures, the lessons learnt from our handling of the pandemic, and explored alternate and less drastic ways to deal with future pandemics.

Psychiatrist Dr Surenthran Pillay said the pandemic had led to an increase in mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, re-

sulting not only from the illness and deaths but also from job losses and economic fallout.

"The other complication that has to be managed is the associated increase in poverty that comes with Covid. Africa is not the wealthiest region. With Covid coming, we are not giving attention to people's other needs. We can't neglect communities' needs because the anxieties and psychiatric aspect of the lack of food or lack of housing or other economic complications that come from Covid are just as

important."

Pillay also speaks of the impact on children.

"We have a whole generation of kids who spent two years behind masks, and important stages in their lives like recognising facial expressions were lost for them."

Dr Samantha Potgieter, an expert on infectious diseases from the University of the Free State, says there's hope that future pandemics will be better managed due to the lessons learnt this time.

"Unfortunately, we certainly can't say that Covid is over, and if I were to guess what the future holds, I think the hope is that as repeated infections occur and vaccine boosters are fine-tuned, we will continue to see waves of the disease but with less and less dis-

ruption of our lives."

The role of the media also came under scrutiny. Ogechi Ekeanyawu, the Sub-Saharan regional editor of the African Science podcast, speaks about the critical role of the media in disseminating "credible and scientifically backed" information about vaccines and treatment during a pandemic.

In the era of social media, "where anyone can come with a camera or any text that they like to put out," she says, "it is important that all information is verified and authentic".

"We're looking at the science, listening to the scientists, making sure that they have a larger voice; so, sort of centring their voices in our reports so that we are not misinformed at any point in time."

She said that the media had ignored monkeypox, which the World Health Organization recently declared a public health emergency until it spread to Europe and other developed countries.

"It has always existed here, particularly in West Africa in countries like Congo and Nigeria, but all of a sudden, it is now a global concern, and people are now talking about research. Monkeypox existed all the while here, and there was no spotlight on it."

Dr Subeshnee Munien, an environmental scientist, warns that even if Covid ends, infectious diseases and pandemics are "going to be more frequent than we'd like to believe".

She says Covid has devastated the poorest of the poor and exposed "what needs to be done for us to be better prepared for the next infectious event."

The message was clear: This is no time for complacency; we need to learn from our experience of Covid to be able to deal with future pandemics in a more constructive and less disruptive way.

- IPS UN Bureau Report