

Dear Fellow South African,

The number of deaths from coronavirus recently passed the 2,000 mark. Among those who have lost their lives are health care workers, consummate professionals who cared for the ill, and were a support and comfort to those in hospital isolated from their families.

That the men and women carrying out this most noble and sacred of duties are themselves falling ill and dying is a devastating blow.

They are on the frontline of fighting this pandemic. They are working under great pressure and must carry the psychological strain of knowing they are at risk of contracting the virus. They are the true heroes and heroines of our battle against coronavirus.

We salute these brave South Africans who leave their homes, families and loved ones to report without fail for duty every day in clinics, hospitals and other health facilities. There they provide medical care, administrative support and other services like cleaning and catering.

Just as they perform what is their professional duty, we too have a duty to them and to their families. Their health and their safety must be paramount.

We honour them and uphold them as the men and women who have demonstrated they are prepared to risk their lives so that we may live.

For them to do their Herculean work they need our support as well as protection through the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE).

With the support of the Solidarity Fund and donations from many individual South Africans, businesses, foundations and other governments, we have been able to procure personal protective equipment for these brave frontline workers. Where there have been shortages of PPE our hospitals are urgently attending to ensuring that they are available.

We know that access to PPE is not the only challenge our health care workers face. Across the country clinics and hospitals are facing staff shortages. This problem is being attended to.

To support the work that our frontline workers are performing around the country we are deploying Ministers and Deputy Ministers to each of the districts in the country to get a line of sight of specific challenges in these districts and to work with provincial health authorities.

We need to work together to safeguard the health of not just our frontline workers but the entire workforce.

There has already been sterling work done by unions in educating members around infection control and prevention and hygiene. They are also supporting the work of the Department of Employment and Labour in conducting workplace inspections to ensure health and safety protocols are in place for returning workers. Many of our trade unions are also providing coronavirus information to their members and employers are running awareness campaigns.

One of the challenges that has emerged in our country is the stigmatisation of people who have proven positive with coronavirus. As a society, we have a collective responsibility to stamp out the stigmatisation of people infected with the coronavirus. There have been disturbing reports of individuals being ostracised from their communities and of

communities protesting against coronavirus patients being admitted to local hospitals and clinics. This must stop.

Just as we came together to promote acceptance of people living with HIV and stood firm against victimisation, we must show understanding, tolerance, kindness, empathy and compassion for those who are infected with this virus and for their families.

It is said that this stigmatisation is driven by fear of contracting the disease and lack of understanding. The best way to overcome our instinctive fear of illness and contagion is to observe the hygiene protocols that are in place. The fear of infection is well-founded and real. At the same time, we know what we have to do to protect ourselves and others.

We know what causes the virus and what we can do to protect ourselves from becoming infected. We know we have to maintain social distancing, to self-isolate if we have come into contact with those infected and to present to a hospital if we have symptoms.

We must continue to be guided by facts and not rumours.

The time when anyone could say they do not know anyone who is infected or affected by coronavirus has long passed. Now, more than ever, our friends, families, colleagues and neighbours need our empathy and support.

In the days, weeks and months that lie ahead, we will at times find ourselves despondent and fearful as we see the numbers of people infected and dying continue to rise. It may be that things have gotten worse, but we are certain that they will get better. Our scientists and medical advisers told us that the rate of infections will go up as we move towards our peak. But it will certainly come down.

We pay tribute to the health care workers who lost their lives caring for the sick. In their memory, let us keep ourselves and our fellow citizens safe by playing our part.

We shall overcome this virus and rebuild our society. We have seen darker times and we have prevailed.

Let us spare neither strength nor courage as we work together to save lives.