

UKZN among the first in Africa COVID-19 University Intervention

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is to launch a ground breaking Campus Health 'War Room' in a bid to lend a hand in the international efforts of fighting the deadly Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

To bolster these efforts, the University has created an email address: covid19@ukzn.ac.za, the hashtag: #ukzncovid19 that staff and students can make enquiries to. The University is in the process of creating a hotline which will aid in communicating with its stakeholders about the virus.

"The threat of the new Coronavirus is compelling motivation why we, as a University, need to constantly be alert and put in place proactive and pro-response mechanisms to combat diseases and illnesses," said Professor Nana Poku, UKZN Vice-Chancellor and Principal. "The rampant COVID-19 pandemic has already spread to six continents and there are no signs that it is being brought under control. Starting today (Tuesday, 3 March 2020), the University's College of Health Sciences, headed by its Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Busisiwe Ncama, is instituting a large-scale high level surveillance, prevention and response measures to make sure that we are ready for when COVID-19 is detected in our vicinity", said Poku.

"The plan offers a coordinated cohesive strategy for preparedness, and will require each and every one of us to get involved. We believe in this instance, prevention is better than cure. Given the high concentration of people on our campuses (students and staff), prevention and protection against the spread of disease is critical," he added.

The project will be led by Professor Mosa Moshabela, the Dean and Head of School: Nursing and Public Health. Moshabela will be leading a team of experts comprised of Dr Velile Ngidi, Public Health Medicine Registrar; Dr Richard Lessells, Infectious Disease Specialist; Dr Saajida Mahomed, Public Health Medicine Specialist UKZN; Dr Lilishia Gounder, Clinical Virologist; Dr Nokukhanya Msomi, Head of Virology at UKZN; and Dr Saloshni Naidoo, Head of Public Health Medicine.

Members of UKZN Occupational Health and Campus Health Services, Mr Muzi Mthembu, Ms Gugulethu Mdunge, Ms Jane Taylor, Ms Nozipho Jali, and Ms Jabu Hlophe will also form part of the team to ensure institutional readiness for COVID-19. "The University is committed to putting in place measures to strengthen these essential campus health services before our campus is hit by the virus," added Poku.

The team heading the project will also co-opt experts and volunteers from various colleges, schools, disciplines, travel, and other university structures and student communities to assist in awareness and provide expert advice.

"The objective is the immediate launch of a multi-disciplinary Campus Health 'War Room', which will be the first of its kind in Africa. The 'War Room' will provide the necessary evidence and guidance to effectively respond to COVID-19, and this may include a policy of quarantine, including self-quarantine, in all possible cases of exposure for the duration of

the incubation period, and based on any requirements by the health authorities such as the Department of Health, National Institute for Control of Disease (NICD), and the World Health Organisation (WHO)".

Poku said while no cases of the disease have been detected in South Africa, the World Health Organisation expects most, if not all countries, to detect cases. "We know cases have already been detected in Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt, Senegal and now Morocco, and that two South Africans have been diagnosed in Japan, and more than 150 South Africans in Wuhan will be brought back into the country," said Poku.

The UKZN high-level approach includes:

1. The rollout of a high-impact health awareness campaign. This is to empower staff and students with information on the virus along with travel advice to reduce the risk of infection to themselves, thereby reducing the risk of transmission to others. Should anyone become infected, they will be equipped with important factual knowledge about the virus.

2. An effective infection control and health promotion intervention. This involves high-impact efforts to promote, implement and monitor hygiene behaviours and practices likely to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by all staff, students, contractors and visitors at all UKZN campuses. The multi-faceted approach will include hand hygiene practices, the use hand sanitisers in every building and entrance, cleaning high-risk surfaces correctly and adoption of correct cough/sneeze etiquette.

3. A fully trained team will also be on standby to work closely with the health authorities and government to manage symptomatic persons, along with clear procedures and trained experts to manage and track people within the greater University community who possibly had contact with them for the screening of COVID-19.

"Our ground team is currently assessing the type of resources and training that campus health services and staff require. Apart from ensuring that adequate clinical management protocols and procedures are put in place, they (the team) will also ensure adequate infection control measures, protocols and equipment - including personal protective equipment, gloves and N95 masks - are also made available if and when required. Other processes and procedures - including diagnostic facilities, equipment and support such as effective transportation and institutional readiness - are also part of the plan," said Poku.

The University will in the incoming weeks, build capacity to keep track of all known cases globally, regionally, nationally, provincially and locally. Going forward, the team will keep a close watch on COVID-19 in South Africa, having access to dashboards and databases that will allow them to know how the spread of COVID-19 is unfolding should it approach South Africa and KwaZulu-Natal, and such information will be shared with all stakeholders.

The rollout will also include the tracking of movements of all staff. Working with the internal travel agency, staff members are also encouraged to limit non-essential travel to high risk zones.

Staff and students can send enquiries to covid19@ukzn.ac.za which is up and running and the general public toll-free number 0800 029 999 pending the creation of its own (hotline). An information leaflet detailing the virus, its symptoms and where to get help, is currently being circulated to staff and students alike.

“It is our hope that this effort, under our banner *#ukzncovid19*, will support and benefit our local communities to detect, prevent and respond to the virus. As an institution of higher learning with exceptional clinical expertise, we will no doubt be called upon to support eThekweni and Pietermaritzburg, and the rest of the province, should the need arise, and we must remain ready for such responsibilities. We may call upon our UKZN community to join the COVID-19 community mobilisation campaign, which will involve our volunteers and staff going out in the community, together with local and provincial government, to create awareness about the spread of the disease.

For more information contact:

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