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To: Provincial Departments of Health, Private Laboratories and Academic Laboratories

RE: INSTRUCTION TO ALL PUBLIC, PRIVATE AND ACADEMIC LABORATORIES TO SUBMIT ALL COVID-19 PCR POSITIVE SAMPLES FOR SEQUENCING IN A TIMELY MANNER TO ENHANCE SURVEILLANCE IN LIGHT OF REDUCED RESTRICTIONS IN CHINA

Following the abandonment of the zero-COVID policy in China, Chinese authorities will allow Chinese nationals to travel more easily abroad from 8 January 2023. There are fears that the end of almost three years of strict measures in the country of 1.4 billion people could result in the spread of the disease and possible introduction of a new variant to the rest of the world in light of the surge in infections. This coupled with a lack of adequate information from China, particularly on the strains circulating in the country, has resulted in several countries instituting travel restrictions for travellers through and from China.

The reduction in COVID-19 restrictions in China and resumption of travel through and from China is not anticipated to pose a significant threat to South Africa in terms of imported cases from China. Therefore, we are recommending that South Africa should not implement travel restrictions. South Africa has very high levels of immunity and ongoing circulation of COVID-19 (albeit at low testing rates) as well as low case, hospitalisation and death rates. Although it is plausible that a new variant may emerge in China, it is deemed unlikely that a more severe or substantial immune escape variant will represent a substantial threat to South Africa.

However, we as South Africa must increase vigilance for the next 30-day period through increased testing for COVID-19 where clinical suspicion exists. For this purpose, all Provincial Health Departments must:

1. Increase surveillance through use of antigen testing and PCR testing where appropriate. Provincial Departments must conduct a confirmatory PCR test for all positive antigen tests.
2. All individuals who test positive with antigen testing for COVID-19 must have a confirmatory PCR test and all antigen test results, both negative and positive, must be timeously reported on the NHLS Community Screening Application (CSA).

3. All public, private and academic laboratories must submit all COVID-19 PCR positive samples for sequencing in a timely manner.

In support of these recommendations, the NHLS will make 500 000 antigen tests freely available to the national and provincial departments of health to increase testing and to better determine community positivity rates.

Sincerely



Dr MJ PHAAHLA (MP)
MINISTER OF HEALTH

DATE: 06/01/2023