

# Editorial: Social stigma causes mass hysteria

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Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has widely issued guidelines related to Covid-19, including critical information on prevention.

While it is fair to suggest that the current pandemic has caught the entire world off guard owing to its slow spread in China at the end of last year, much has also been said about Africa's preparedness and response to the rapidly spreading virus.

History has shown that pandemics tend to incite social stigma and discrimination. The dreaded Ebola, which can also spread quickly and for which there is no known cure, has also provoked wide scale bias against victims, while the stigmatisation of HIV/Aids sufferers is well documented. Covid-19 is no exception if one of our front page articles of this week is anything to go by.

The reality is that Covid-19 has brought with it panic, which has created mass hysteria even within places of work. It is worse in poor communities where grasping Covid-19 information has proven to be a challenge.

It is indeed sad to see that there is a stigma growing not only around people infected with the virus, but even healthcare workers and other frontliners, including hospital cleaners, risking their lives.

It must be said that the wellbeing and emotional resilience of our dedicated personnel at the frontline of the Covid-19 battle is key to the fight against this invisible but deadly enemy.

Those at the frontline are dealing with unprecedented stress and need to be supported by all and sundry during these highly unpredictable times.

The situation calls for compassion instead of shaming those infected.

We are all affected by this pandemic. Coronavirus is colour blind and it does not discriminate.

Although our country is not overwhelmed by a large number of active cases, there is no time to rest on our laurels, given the threat posed by this virus. As health minister Dr Kalumbi Shangula emphasised this week, worse is still to come before we can turn the corner and eliminate Covid-19 as a nation.

In the same vein, it is critical that all stakeholders intensify efforts aimed at rolling out education awareness campaigns, especially targeting those in remote areas, who may necessarily not have the privilege of accessing social and mainstream media services.

Apart from ensuring all communities have access to basic sanitary supplies like safe water and soap, there is a need to develop simple and child-friendly public information campaigns to give children and their families the information they need to protect themselves from infection, that way, we can combat misinformation about Covid-19 that can increase anxiety and distress among our people.

Staff Reporter