



CORONAVIRUS HEALTH AND SAFETY

MANAGING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

By Deon Bester – OHS Manager (MBAWC)

In the President's speech on Sunday night, he made a plea to the nation to act responsibly and practice the three fundamentals of preventing the spread of the virus, namely:

- Wash hands frequently or sanitize if soap and water is not available;
- Wear a face mask whilst in public;
- Practise social distancing.

We need to take heed of this plea and accept that the virus is spreading at a rapid rate and that, as responsible citizens of South Africa, we can dramatically influence a reduction in the infection rate. My experience in visiting construction sites over the last few weeks indicates that contractors are doing everything possible to manage the spread of the virus on sites by providing the necessary PPE, hand washing facilities, screening protocols, social distancing and training.

The one challenge faced by all employers, however, is the lack of control over what happens outside the work site. Many workers use public transport and it is a well-established fact that the rules are being flouted by taxi drivers and operators. In addition, many workers are being transported in crowded vehicles supplied by their Employers as well where social distancing is not being practiced.

The President, in his speech, spoke specifically to people not adhering to the three fundamentals mentioned above and he further voiced his concerns about people generally flouting the rules to the detriment of their fellow South Africans. We all have a role to play in slowing down and stopping the spread of the virus by simply following the rules. We must take responsibility for our own health and safety and the health and safety of our family, friends, and fellow citizens. We must practice the simple principal of being "my brother's keeper". Together we can stop the spread of the virus.

We have seen numerous prominent political figures testing positive for COVID-19 and our very own Premier is in self-isolation after testing positive.

In an article published on News 24, the issue of close contact and "casual contact" were addressed, specifically in relation to some contact the Premier had before testing positive.

By now we should all know how close contact is defined, but for the sake of information, close contact is defined as follows by the NICD:

What does being in a close contact mean?

You have been in close contact with someone who has confirmed coronavirus disease, but you do not have any symptoms yourself. Close contact means that you had face-to-face contact within 1 meter or were in a closed space for more than 15 minutes with a person with COVID-19. This contact happened while the person with COVID-19 was still "infectious", i.e. from 2 days before to 14 days after their symptoms began. For example, you may be someone who:

1. Lives in the same household as a person with COVID-19
2. Works closely in the same environment as a person with COVID-19
3. Sat in the same classroom as a person with COVID-19

4. Attended the same gathering as a person with COVID-19
5. Provided direct care for a person with COVID-19 in a healthcare setting without using the proper personal protective equipment
6. Sat within two seats (1 meter) in any direction of a person with COVID-19 case in any kind of vehicle including buses, minibus taxis, etc.
7. Served as a crew member in the section of an aircraft where a person with COVID-19 was seated.

We need to avoid close contact at all times as this will definitely help curb the spread of the virus.

Another type of contact that most of us would probably be exposed to on a construction site is “**casual contact**”.

Casual contact is not defined at all in South Africa, however there are countries that do define “casual contact” such as Australia and New Zealand. The Australian National Health authorities advise the following:

“Casual contact is someone who has been in the same general area as someone who has tested positive for the coronavirus infection.

You are a casual contact if:

- a) You have had less than 15 minutes face-to-face contact in any setting with a confirmed case in the 24-hour period before the onset of their symptoms; or
- b) You have shared a close space with a confirmed case for less than 2 hours in the 24-hour period before the onset of their symptoms (but did not breach one meters and did not have face-to-face contact time). ”

The New Zealand Health authority has a far simpler definition, and define it as follows:

- a) “A “casual contact” is “any person who does not meet the criteria for a close contact.”

The President also spoke about people taking care to “self-assess” before leaving their homes and to self-isolate should you feel symptomatic.

To this end, no-one should present at the entrance to a site or for that matter, any workplace with symptoms. Employees must self-assess before leaving home and should advise their employer of their status.

Contractors who transport their workforce to site must assess their employees before entering the vehicle and must turn anyone away who presents with symptoms and provide them with the correct information regarding the procedures they need to follow.

Every employer, including sub-contractors, must screen their workers, and record the findings in the event that they need to do contact tracing should someone on their staff test positive. While it does remain the duty of the Principal Contractor to screen people entering the site, we cannot leave it up to the Principal Contractor to take responsibility for sub-contractors not performing their statutory duties. The Principal Contractor should not be saddled with an employee of a sub-contractor presenting at site with symptoms and possibly exposing people around him to the virus.

At the end of the day it is quite simple:

Follow the three simple rules: wash your hands, wear a mask and practice social distancing. Stop acting irresponsibly - if you are not concerned with your own health, at least consider the health of others.