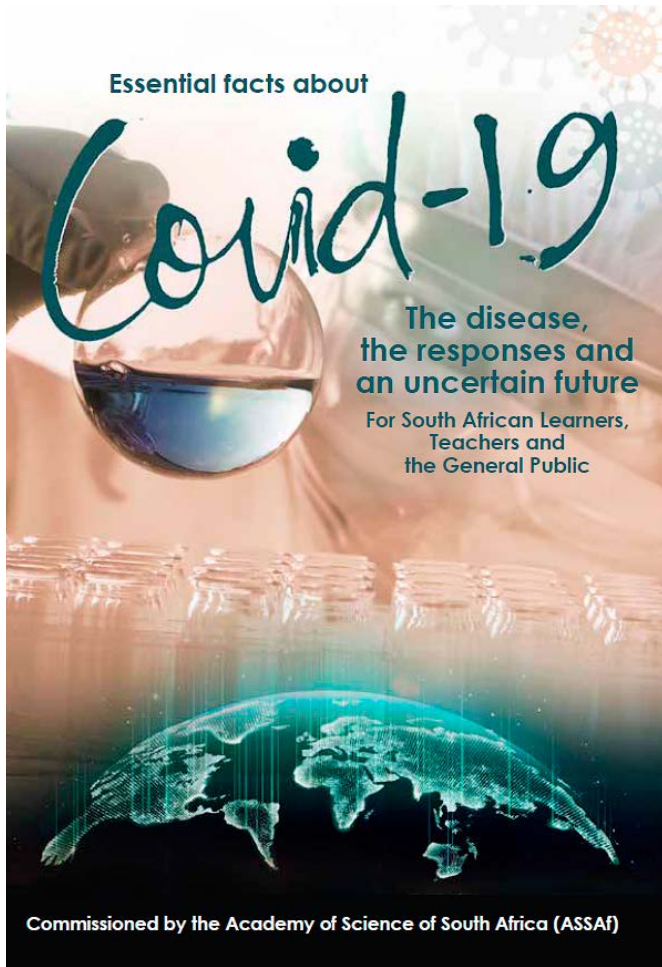


Essential facts about Covid-19



The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) recently launched a booklet it commissioned to educate learners, teachers and the general public about the Covid-19 crisis.

Essential facts about Covid 19 – The disease, the responses and an uncertain future is a collective effort by ASSAf Members, staff and invited scholars to help understand some of the basic scientific facts that are needed to understand the current crisis and the various options available to respond to it. The booklet emphasises that the threat of infectious diseases is not a new phenomenon, and pandemics have occurred for centuries. Scientists had warned for years of the need to prepare for the next one.

The first cases of a new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, were identified toward the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China. Over the following months, this infectious agent spread to everywhere in the world, and by now no country has been spared the loss of lives from the coronavirus disease, or Covid-19, nor the economic and social impacts of responses to mitigate its impact.

Covid-19 remains a major challenge worldwide. On the positive side, the scientific effort to develop vaccines against the disease has been immensely successful, and by mid-September 2021 vaccination campaigns were being rolled out in some 200 countries. However, in South Africa and elsewhere, there are many who are hesitant to be vaccinated, and this is a major impediment to slowing down and stopping the disease.

This situation highlights the importance of disseminating basic knowledge about science and medicine to the broader public. It is not sufficient to have a high level of scientific knowledge concentrated among a small group of experts. This is even more true today, when so much false information is being disseminated via social media and other internet-based platforms. Consequently, the ability to distinguish reliable information from less trustworthy information is an extremely important skill.

The booklet aims to enrich knowledge with some of the basics of medicine, viruses and epidemiology. Beyond the immediate Covid-19 crisis, South Africa faces a number of other major health challenges: highly unequal access to quality healthcare, widespread tuberculosis, HIV infection causing AIDS, a high prevalence of mental illness, and a low life expectancy. It is essential that young people, also learn about the nature of these new challenges, so that they may contribute to finding future solutions.

The booklet is available at the following link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/assaf.2021/0072> and on the *Quest* website at <https://questonline.org.za/issues/>

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