

Our health is our humanity

By [Amy Pieterse](#), issued by [Ginkgo Agency](#)

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Human Rights Day is cause for celebration, a recognition of the progress South Africa has made. Our rights make us who we are. But as the spread of coronavirus shows, it is our right to health that is at the crux of everything.



Coronavirus has all but brought the world to its knees. Countries are under lockdown. People are being quarantined. Stock markets are falling. Life as we know it has been fundamentally altered, requiring a recalibration of actions and behaviours, both large and small. This global crisis has placed our human fragility into stark focus. Who are we without our health?

When we think of our human rights, dignity, equality, and freedom are the obvious things that come to mind. Now more than ever, it is our right to health that we need to uphold. In order to defend the rights we are entitled to, we must protect our wellbeing and that of others.

It is within our [constitutional right](#) to have access to healthcare. But it is up to us to champion this right. The government can only provide treatments, medicines, and services within its available resources. Healthcare in South Africa is still reeling from the effects of apartheid. Although we are valiantly dealing with the outbreak of coronavirus, there's no denying that we have some way to go in terms of our healthcare system. So it is up to all of us to contribute. Just as we have in the past, we must now stand together for our rights, particularly our right to be healthy. And that means being mindful of the role we can play.

Old divisions, new burdens

In South Africa, our healthcare system is [divided between the public and private sector](#) – that is, between the wealthy and poor, and between rural and urban areas. While strides have been made to redress the unequal healthcare system of apartheid, imbalances remain. Approximately only 16% of the population has [medical aid coverage](#), granting them easier access to private facilities which have higher standards of care.

Our public health system, which serves the majority of the population, is inundated with challenges: a shortage of equipment, lack of personnel, an overburden of healthcare users. Many medical practitioners choose to enter the private sector or move overseas to better facilities. The effects of this inequality reflect in the state of our healthcare system in

comparison to the rest of the world. In 2016, South Africa was ranked [127 out of 195](#) countries on the Healthcare Access and Quality Index.

The proposed introduction of the National Health Bill aims to address the deficiencies affecting our health services. Whether it will be effective is yet to be seen. We must all take collective responsibility for our wellbeing. And here is the good news. South Africans are demonstrating what it means to protect and care for one another. Even long before the outbreak, people have been quietly working behind the scenes to improve our healthcare, ensuring no one gets left behind. Our right to health is already in our hands.

The right to health requires action

Committed professionals are transforming healthcare services in their own way, defending the rights of people. [Dr Paulo de Valdoeiros](#) only became a doctor at the age of 51. While he always dreamed of helping people, he couldn't afford to attend medical school until later in life. Recognising the need for accessible care, he allows his patients to pay what they can. "One of the problems in healthcare is that we depersonalise the patient," he says. "I believe that healthcare is a calling and not a profession like any other."

In the community of Atlantis, unabating gang-related casualties prevented healthcare workers from attending to the community. So in May 2019, nurse [Olivia Pharo](#) cashed in her pension and opened a clinic to assist those in need. She also offers house calls for patients who are bedridden or don't have transport. In the first three months of opening, she helped over 700 people.

While completing her community service in the small town of Cradock, [Dr Nosimphiwo Peni](#) felt the strain of limited resources. She could have moved on to the private sector. Instead, she stayed, determined to fix the problem rather than ignore it. Dr Peni has since opened the first ever 24-hour clinic in Cradock. As the only doctor there, she lives above the facility, always on call.

It is not only doctors and nurses making the change. Optometrist Werner Fourie provides affordable eye tests and glasses to people in disadvantaged areas, while [Sizwe Nzima](#) delivers chronic medication to over 2 000 people in Khayelitsha who cannot easily get to the pharmacy. Then there's [Sthembiso Ngubo](#). After years working as a gardener, he qualified as a paramedic. Now he has his own ambulance service, going into communities that other emergency services refuse to out of fear of crime.

While the world devolves into a state of panic and prevention, these everyday heroes remind us that there is hope. Upholding our right to health depends on individuals dedicated to saving and improving lives. It depends on all of us. Our health is our humanity. So take care of yourself. Take care of your fellow human. We aren't just bodies, or patients. We are people. And we must protect one another.

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