

## **\*Views on Ghana's Covid-19 Response\***

First, I think I want to commend the president and the ministry of health for some of the efforts so far albeit belated. A lot of the measures like the border closure and the testing of all the contacts being traced that was announced should have been done some 2 weeks ago i.e. 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 when we recorded our first case!

We now have a problem of community infections. What we should be mindful of is ensuring that these community infections are not in any of the densely populated areas in Accra or Kumasi...else, we should be ready for a long haul...

Our situation is even dire because of the number of testing sites and its accessibility. We're told Noguchi and KCCR have the capacity to run in excess of 1000 tests in a day if push comes to shove. However, they are doing a test turn-around-time of 6 hours and in many instances even more (than 6 hours). You see, an essential quality dimension in this Covid-19 response is timeliness! Within that 6 hours, a lot could happen in terms of transmission of the infection to others. I hear someone tell me; suspects will be quarantined but this is not in all cases. It was interesting to hear the President finally heed the call to make testing accessible and to open up the criteria to including asymptomatic (*or people who are not showing any signs and symptoms*). I think the Public Health Reference Labs should be quickly equipped and capacitated to complement the efforts of Noguchi and KCCR! Let's heed the advice of the WHO-DG on the urgent need to "test, test and test". We cannot continue fighting an enemy we're not seeing or is invisible!

The increase in access to testing is also necessary because it will enable the healthcare system to pick up cases early and start case management. This is key because it can reduce significantly the number of people whose conditions might progress to the next stage i.e. critical/severe and might need hospitalization. At this stage, our health system will crumble like is happening in Italy and elsewhere! This will also seriously affect the safety of our healthcare staff! We have to do everything possible to reduce the number of people who will need hospitalization...

Again, those doing the contact tracing and/or responsible for the data should be able to share where these contacts are residing for instance so everyone in the respective neighborhoods could be extra careful. Please don't say it will lead to stigmatization because it is necessary to enhance public health and safety. I think we are becoming very stingy with the amount of information we are sharing and it is adding to the public anxiety, fear and panic! I commend the leadership of the Ghana Health Service (GHS) with the support of partners for the creation of the website for Covid-19 but I think it is still not enough. The frequency of update is too slow and need to be improved!

Furthermore, is the protection of our frontline healthcare workers! This is very crucial. I think the current efforts is woefully inadequate...we cannot afford to have the numbers of health worker fatalities we are seeing in other countries! The Personal Protective Equipment (PPE's) should be made readily available and accessible. Until date, there has not even been one simulation done on our readiness and response! This is very belated now given that we have 53 confirmed cases (*with 2 mortalities*)<sup>1</sup> we are dealing with now but...all these are necessary to boost their confidence in dealing with the situation. Another subject that is key for healthcare workers is also compensation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/>

How much are we going to pay them for this battle? What do we have for their families and dependents in the unlikely event that they lose their lives? What psychological and social support systems do we have available for healthcare workers who test positive in the line of duty? What do we have for their relations and families in the event that their loved ones have to be quarantined in the event of exposure? If these discussions are going on, let's make it public but we have to know!

Also, for me is the level of public education we're seeing. This is woefully inadequate and there is an urgent need to step-up else we are in trouble. People are still walking around nonchalantly and engrossed in very weird myths that will have to be dealt with as soon as possible else if we start recording our cases in 100s and 1000s, we'll be in serious trouble!

Finally, in view of the trend and pattern of our epidemic curve, I think we should heed the advice of all the experts and lockdown! We can have a progressive lockdown by starting in Accra and Kumasi which are becoming the epicenters in Ghana. Any announcement of this next week will also be very too late because its impact will take weeks if not months to realize. Let's discuss with the churches and schools and accommodate some of the homeless people there among other things. We don't have time! We are racing behind the virus and countries that have done that are paying dearly now for it! Let us not reinvent the wheel as a nation, there is abundance of data and information out there to guide an effective response as a country. Let us go out there and adopt/adapt what has worked and is working elsewhere. This attempt at we trying to re-write the script will not help us!

However, let us remember to continue to wash our hands regularly with soap under running water or with alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Let's also ensure social distancing. Avoid unessential travels and stay home! Stop touching surfaces and your faces!

The day all of this will be over, I'm hoping we would have learnt enough to improve our health system to make it more resilient to deal with any future pandemic or threat. I also hope we will be very aggressive as a country in supporting indigenous businesses so that we can be self-reliant as our forebearers envisaged. Also hope that, we would have learnt enough to plan our cities and towns to ensure easy identification and accessibility. Until then, let's use what we have to get what we want! These systems are built over time and we don't have the luxury of time now!

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