

SAOA STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE SHIFT FROM MAXIMUM DISEASE- ALERT LEVEL 5 TO NATIONAL LEVEL 4

'VIRUSES DON'T MOVE: PEOPLE DO'

(Minister Ebrahim Patel)

THE OBLIGATIONS OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS TO THEIR PATIENTS, INCLUDING OPTOMETRISTS AND DISPENSING OPTICIANS, WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A DECLARED NATIONAL DISASTER, WAS DEFINED IN LEVEL 5 (AS PER HPCSA GUIDELINES AND SAOA POSITION). THE SHIFT TO LEVEL 4 IS NOT INTENDED TO INTERFERE WITH THESE OBLIGATIONS, WHICH ARE RELIANT ON THE PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION OF PRACTITIONERS AND TAKES INTO CONSIDERATION THE RISK/BENEFIT RATIO.

IN UNDERTAKING THEIR RISK ADJUSTED STRATEGY, THE NATIONAL CORONAVIRUS COMMAND COUNCIL (NCCC) AND THE MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19 INTEND TO PHASE IN OTHER KEY SECTORS AND PRIORITY AREAS WITH A VIEW TO DEEPENING THE FIGHT AGAINST THE PANDEMIC, WHILST SIMULTANEOUSLY REBUILDING THE ECONOMY.

Introduction

The Government will begin easing a nationwide lockdown next week that has devastated the general economy, while retaining a raft of restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The economic impact on optometric practices, to date, has not been under-estimated.

The country will move from the maximum disease-alert level 5 to a national level 4 on May 1, allowing the phased reopening of some businesses and industries subject to strict precautions, as announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in a televised address to the nation on Thursday 23 April 2020.

The announcement has been a catalyst of further confusion and uncertainty as optometrists and dispensing opticians remain unsure as to whether the shift to level 4 means 'back to work' - or not.

SAOA: Key Factors

From the perspective of the SAOA, the following factors have relevance.

1. The move from the maximum disease- alert level 5 to a national level 4 on 1 May 2020 does not mean a lifting of the lockdown. The lockdown still exists with a few changes. In general, South Africans remain confined to their homes with regulated restricted movement which includes emphasis on the well- being of communities and access to essential services such as purchase of food, medical emergencies, attendance at funerals, etc. There is also an imposed curfew
2. A key reason for the 'down grade' is the restart of core parts of the economy as part of a phased approach and to allow businesses to prepare for the future.
3. The principle that underpins the move from level 5 to 4, is to calibrate the level of 'openness' with the degree of risk.
4. If the rate of increase of COVID 19 does not meet criteria to 'flatten the curve', the country will be forced to revert back to Level 5.

5. There are identified 'hot spots' in the country. Whilst at this time, Level 4 is applicable to all provinces, these hotspots indicate increased susceptibility due to a higher incidence of COVID 19 infection. This is one of the reasons why inter-provincial travel is prohibited (with few exceptions).
6. For those industries who are now permitted to return to work, companies must adhere to strict guidelines to include daily screening of staff (e.g. temperatures).
7. For those who are legitimately permitted to leave their homes, social distancing remains the order of the day, and all are obligated to wear cloth masks.
8. Health services includes optometry, as per the Standard Industry Classification (SIC).

SAOA Recommendations

As frontline (primary) health professionals, with ethical obligations to patients, Optometrists should use their professional discretion to determine the necessity and timing of eye and vision care, including assessing patient expressed urgency.

It is to be noted that during Level 5, emphasis was placed on emergency services by some medical schemes for payment of claims. With reference to Level 4, there is preparation by medical schemes to accommodate relaxation of the regulations. In addition, driver licencing centres will be operational which may result in members of the public requiring certificates.

The following guidelines are intended to assist the practitioner to continue to run his/her practice, by adapting aspects of the practice to reduce the likelihood of contracting or spreading the virus, for the benefit of practitioner, family, staff and patient.

- Practitioners should open practices only to attend to those patients needing prompt attention, as per professional judgement of the Optometrist.
- Patients should be allowed access to practices, one at a time, to be seen by appointment only.
- Patients and staff in the practice must religiously adhere to social distancing, as regulated at all times (2 m apart)
- Ideally, practices should remain open for short periods.
- For larger practices, practitioners are reminded that one third of your staff compliment are allowed in the practice at any given time.
- Practitioners are to exercise extreme caution regarding comorbidity and older patients.
- We strongly recommend that practices strictly observe safety protocols and guidelines which include wearing a medical mask by practitioners and cloth masks for staff and patients at all times, with rigorous sanitisation procedures. Detailed guidelines will follow.
- Where physical consultation does not appear advisable or where practices remain closed, practitioners may assist and/or advise patients via the principles of tele-health and may charge for such consultations, using the SAOA code 11041.
- Print your HPCSA card and keep it with your person at all times, especially when travelling.
- Please note that SAOA COVID 19 website is live and loaded with all recent updates - www.saoacovid19.co.za

We acknowledge the extreme difficulties and challenges facing the professions from so many perspectives, during this difficult time. Our views, as expressed above, are based on the health of our colleagues and all who come into contact with them underpinned by the preservation of life to be considered above all else.

We also acknowledge that the presence of the virus will be with the globe for a considerable amount of time, therefore a behavioural change from the usual norm will take a long while to return. With an increased economic activity during Level 4, the huge health risk associated with COVID 19 will continue to threaten.

We continue to engage role-players at all levels, including practice related creditors to ease burdens that many have arisen as a result of the lockdown. We will keep you updated in this regard.

KEEP SAFE

Best Regards,
SAOA TEAM