

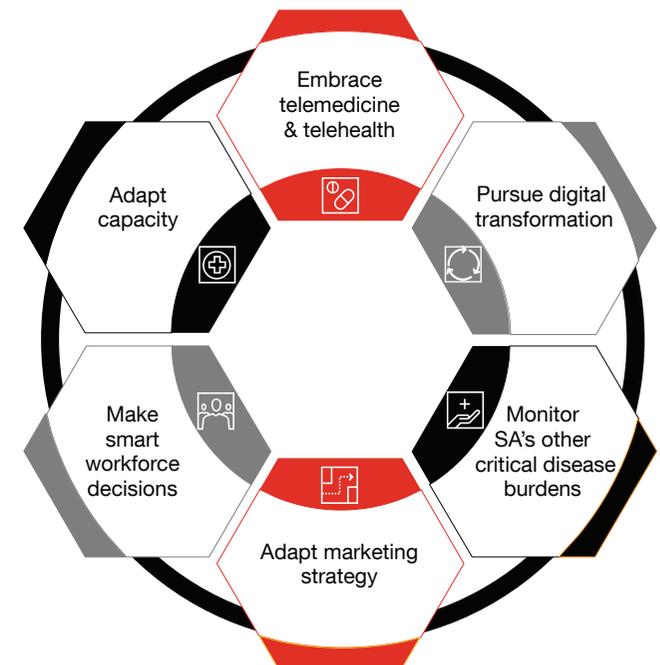
Responding to COVID-19

Considerations for hospitals in South Africa

As the COVID-19 pandemic grips the world, South Africans are looking to government and the healthcare sector to deploy the resources required to successfully cope with the outbreak. There will be many challenges, but the pandemic could also lead to positive long-term changes in local healthcare.

Hospitals are on the frontline of dealing with the pandemic and will be critical to its successful containment and management. Despite coping with the immediate pressure, the hospital industry also has an opportunity to strategically manage the situation in a way that is not only beneficial clinically, but also creates prospects for recovery and growth. With this in mind, this report presents evidence-based alternatives for hospitals to consider in **dealing with the current situation**, while also future proofing the health delivery model.

Figure 1: Considerations for hospitals responding to the COVID-19 pandemic



Adapt capacity

Develop a hospital capacity management process

Hospitals may find they need to optimise their patient flow and ensure adequate bed availability. A strategy to manage capacity is paramount during a pandemic, but also offers long-term benefits. A proven way to enhance visibility is through daily real-time reporting and the use of dashboards (electronic or physical) that provide timely data about current and future bed availability as well as patient acuity and discharge data.

Be creative with your space

Non-critical COVID-19 care is recommended to be reduced or postponed during this time. Space and beds allocated for postponed care can be repurposed to serve COVID-19 patients. Similarly, restructuring current spaces into designated COVID-19 areas can be explored. This may further assist in containing the virus in hospital facilities. Protocol driven patient discharge and follow-up procedures can also help prevent the spread of infection.

Make smart workforce decisions

Protect your workforce

Staff shortages can be a challenge, particularly during a pandemic. Hospitals should consider establishing a task force to support their workforce and execute a clear communication strategy that builds trust and manages anxiety. Time and funding may need to be invested in training and preparing the workforce for new processes, especially prior to the peak stage of COVID-19.

Make smart decisions

It's also important to have pragmatic guidelines. For example, it may not be sustainable to send asymptomatic staff home for 14 days due to exposure to an unconfirmed case. Government guidelines around this are evolving and should be adhered to. Furthermore, reallocation and redeployment of staff may be necessary to meet optimisation and digital transformation requirements. Offering work opportunities to retired staff to assist with care of non-COVID-19 cases may be worth pursuing.

Adapt your marketing strategy

Market in response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and national state of emergency are unprecedented events and hospitals may need to tailor their marketing accordingly. Options include developing a marketing strategy that reinforces the hospital's brand and safeguards its reputation should a crisis arise.

Manage the hospital's reputation and inform the public

Digital marketing and social media can be leveraged to inform the public about the hospital's management of the pandemic. A COVID-19 section displayed prominently on the website can be used to advise the public about any new measures in place to manage patients coming to the hospital during the pandemic. The website can also be used to enhance the brand and educate the public about COVID-19.





Telemedicine & telehealth

Virtual consultations

Telemedicine has proved invaluable in the management of COVID-19, with many governments and healthcare systems adopting it together with other digital healthcare tools. The HPCSA has published guidelines about how to implement telemedicine to patients during the pandemic. Virtual consultations can be a convenient first step and primary means of healthcare support during the COVID-19 outbreak and can include many forms of communication, such as online video calls, SMSs and telephone calls.

Prepare the hospital

Providing telemedicine requires having the necessary physical and digital technology requirements. Investment and training may also be needed to ensure a successful clinical experience. Patient privacy and data security are essential, as are legal consent and other compliance requirements.

Digital transformation

Embrace artificial intelligence (AI) initiatives

Hospitals around the world and in South Africa are deploying robots with mobile or tablet computers to provide care for COVID-19 patients. These solutions may include simple video and camera technology to monitor patients. By accelerating the adoption and scaling of virtual and AI tools, hospitals may benefit from increased productivity, efficiency, and access to the healthcare services that reach a larger number of people. Furthermore, AI in combination with other technology may enhance patient clinical experience while also safeguarding healthcare providers from infectious diseases such as COVID-19.

Minimise steps

Hospitals can optimise current processes by digitising as many steps as possible. This is because traditional manual processes, especially those that rely on people to function in critical paths, are more likely to be constrained by the time and expertise required to train, organise, and deploy human labour. Emerging evidence also suggests that traditional processes deliver decreasing returns as they scale, further highlighting the benefits of digitising.

Monitor other critical disease burdens

Monitor whether disease burdens such as HIV and TB collide

TB and HIV are a significant burden on the South African health system. The impact of COVID-19 on these diseases is not fully understood but is likely to be a concern. Research on this needs to be monitored to better prepare facilities. Current speculation is that critical HIV and TB patients may have a higher risk of developing severe disease, and thus may require more intensive care for longer periods.

Monitor the impact of the upcoming flu season on COVID-19

With winter approaching, the flu season may also peak during the pandemic. Social distancing may assist in reducing its incidence, but it is recommended that hospitals monitor flu trends and prepare appropriately.



Links to relevant guidelines

Health Professions Council of South Africa,
Guidelines on Telemedicine in South Africa
https://www.hpcs.co.za/Uploads/Press%20Releases/2020/Guidelines_to_telemedicine_in_South_Africa.pdf

Health Professions Council of South Africa, COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa: Guidance to health practitioners
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The Department of Employment and Labour,
Workplace Preparedness: COVID-19
<https://www.labourguide.co.za/workshop/1773-covid-19-guideline-mar2020/file>

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PwC has one of the largest healthcare networks advising clients – including policy makers, healthcare providers, payers and health sciences – to meet the challenges of addressing value, new entrants and new global markets.

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COVID-19 in patients with HIV: clinical case series
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World Health Organization (2020): Q&A on COVID-19, HIV and antiretrovirals
<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-on-covid-19-hiv-and-antiretrovirals>

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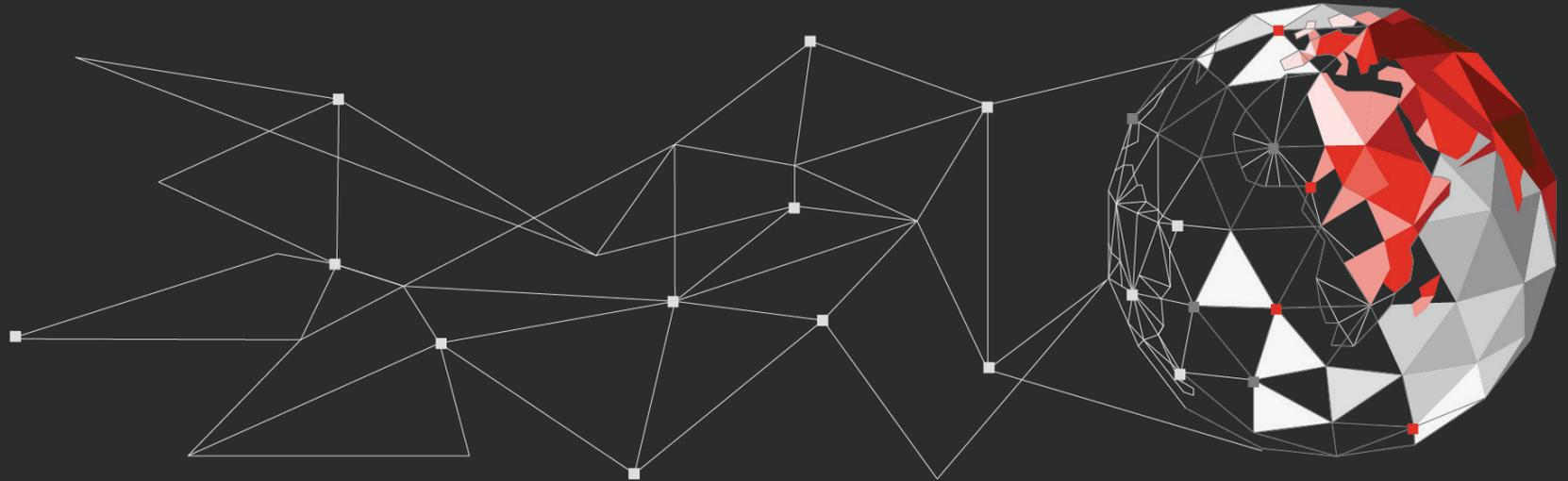
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