



**Reach out and touch somebody's hand...
...make this world a better place if you can.**

Welcome to PhysioBiz, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!

COVID-19 has placed a glaring spotlight on the inequalities in South Africa. We may not be able to reach out and touch our fellow South Africans in this time of social distancing, but there are things we can do to make this world a better place...

Physiotherapy educator, Ntsikelelo Pefile, a lecturer in the Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Division of Physiotherapy, UCT, has spent the last few weeks recovering from COVID-19, which taught him something profound about privilege. He realised, he said, that it's not just about white privilege or male privilege, it applies to other things, too. This becomes very obvious when something like COVID-19 hits you: the privilege of having "access to information, to knowledge and to the best medical care".

If you are receiving this newsletter, chances are that you are a beneficiary of that kind of privilege.

And no matter how tough things are for us in the middle class (and for some, they've become very tough indeed), we are also likely privileged because we are not facing this very difficult time on the nutritional back foot, as so many of our compatriots are. Thanks to poor access to affordable healthy food BEFORE the pandemic struck, "The national prevalence of under-five stunting is 27.4%, which is greater than the developing country average of 25%. [...] South Africa's adult population also face a malnutrition burden. [...] 12.6% of adult women have diabetes, compared to 9.7% of men. Meanwhile, 39.6% of women and 15.4% of men have obesity," according to the Global Nutrition Report 2020.

And as the impact of lockdown and the virus begins to really bite, things are just getting worse for the very poor, with an average basket of staple food increasing by 7.8% since lockdown began, the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group reported late in May. Cabbages alone, that green staple for the budget-constrained, have gone up by a full 10%.

"We simply cannot fight COVID-19 with confidence when the foundation of health, our diet, is so poor," says Rogier van Bever Donker, President of the South African Society of

Physiotherapists (SASP). “Malnourishment puts people across the world at a much greater risk of greater illness and a higher chance of death.”

He points to Brazil, now a COVID-19 epicentre, where extreme inequalities driven by racism lead to “higher rates of chronic illnesses like diabetes, high blood pressure, and respiratory and kidney problems,” as researchers write in a recent Conversation article, and the result has been that “55% of Afro-Brazilian patients hospitalized with severe COVID-19 died, compared to 34% of white COVID-19 patients”.

“We simply can’t, must not, let this happen in South Africa,” says van Bever Donker.

“The SASP has been leading the way by donating face masks for those in need and assisting wherever we can – for example, we donated wheel chair cushions for spinal injury patients who have been sent home earlier than usual thanks to the demands of the pandemic.”

But, he says, “we are called on to do more, not just as physiotherapists for whom public health is close to our hearts, but also as human beings, as members of this society, who by good fortune have the privilege of access to decent medical care and nutritional food.”

In response to the need, he says, “we in the SASP are calling on all our members, and asking our patients and our colleagues, to find a way to plug those holes, to fill stomachs that are aching for food, to boost the health of our fellow South Africans.”

Because even if you only think in practical terms, viruses don’t respect the boundaries of class: if a virus like SARS-CoV2 moves through the ranks of the poor, it spills over into the suburbs very quickly. It’s a very blunt and pragmatic expression of the meaning of *ubuntu*: I am because you are.

It behoves us all to do what we can to improve the health and resilience of the whole population – an effort which will, undoubtedly, stand us in good stead when things settle down, too.

You don’t have to donate to government initiatives, although the Solidarity Fund is an option; you can also choose to donate to an NGO close to your heart which is distributing food or essentials such as soap and sanitisers, or to one which has a good track record. Gift of the Givers is doing important work; #NotInMyName has distributed thousands of meals since lockdown began; UNICEF South Africa is working to help children in particular; Feed SA has a twenty-year record of feeding the needy. Cash is not the only option: a number of people in Joburg, for example, deliver food parcels to Community-Led Animal Welfare (CLAW), which faces a queue daily of, as director Cora Bailey describes it, “emaciated women and children”.

“In the face of such desperate need, I feel blessed that I am able to work, able to feed my own family, able to guard and care for them,” says van Bever Donker. “As a healthcare professional, I and many of my colleagues feel an urgent need to pay it forward by helping those who are on the very brink of despair, and who will likely take the brunt of the pandemic as it peaks. I hope many of you will join us in digging deep for some spare change that can make the difference between health and disease for so many in our beloved country.”

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