



Society of Medical Doctors

P.O Box 1424, Lilongwe

Tel: +265(0)111649179

+265(0)888956370

+265(0)999245155

Email: info@smdmalawi.com

Website: www.smdmalawi.com

Protecting the City of Blantyre from Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) will require strict adherence to the council's hygiene and social distance measures

Dr Amos Nyaka, President of the Society of Medical Doctors (SMD), would like to thank His Worship Concilor Ndipo, the Mayor of Blantyre for inviting us to advise in this time of a Public Health Crisis, a difficult time for the city and the country as a whole. Supporting authorities on health issues is one of the critical pillars of the SMD's very existence, but we cannot do much if we are not invited and given the necessary access. So thank you Your Worship, your council and the executive led by Dr Kanjunjunju for putting the health of your people top of your agenda. **The role of SMD during this pandemic of COVID19 is twofold:**

1. Act as an advisory body to national and local bodies in charge of implementing policies to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.
2. Developing competencies of both health and non-health professionals including members of the public via awareness activities such as orientations and training on national and global developments on COVID19.

We would therefore like to extend our availability to all other entities with interests similar to that of the City of Blantyre, to quickly get in touch and our membership, spread countrywide, will be at your service.

The Mayor provided a background to the disease termed COVID-19 before presenting the various measures he is putting in place. Let me start by giving you the current picture of the epidemic. Since its start in December 2019, COVID-19 started in one part of China and as of today, has spread to almost every country including Tanzania, Mozambique, and Zambia. In that very short period, 723,740 confirmed infections have been registered.

Why is it spreading this fast? It is spreading fast because it is like any other cold or flue that easily moves from one person to the next simply by droplets. As long as the next person is within 1m of the other when they coughed or sneezed, it quickly gets into them via mouth or nose. Also, as human beings, we love being social, being together, hugging, kissing, and holding hands....these are the very acts this virus is also exploiting. The moment we stay in contact like this, we enhance its spread. At the moment, it has been shown that one person is able to transmit to 2 to 4 other people, who if they don't follow strict hygiene, cough etiquette, limited gatherings and social distance which the mayor just announced, will also pass to up to 4 others and so on and so forth.

The rapid spread is also in part due to the virus's resilience. If someone coughed onto a surface, or touched their mouth when coughing, then touched a door handle for example, it can survive there for as many as 4 days. So it can move to the next person if the door handle or table or anything touched by the unhygienic cougher within that period, and subsequently touch their face. This is the basis of the need to keep your hands clean at all times and to avoid touching your or other people's face. It can easily go into your body via eyes, nose, and mouth.



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The hand wash is critical because soap kills the virus. This only succeeds though first if you use soap, and if you have the soap and water flowing through your hands for a reasonably long duration: an average of half a minute. Another recommended alternative is use of **alcohol based handrub**. This is far different from the alcohol in beverages. It has to be at least 60% alcohol. And it is not for drinking but only for washing your hands. This measure can only kill the virus in your hands. Drinking alcohol does not help in any way because alcohol goes to the part of the body that keeps food, but the virus goes to the part that processes air.

Another very effective way of stopping the spread of the virus is by making sure you **stay home if you start feeling fever, cough or are sneezing**. The moment you stay home, you reduce the chances of spreading to others. This is called self isolation. When symptoms worsen, call the hotline number (**0887371288** or Chipatala cha pa phone on 54747) and the hospital team will guide you on what to do.

You can also help the Mayor and the council by **ensuring that no one is digressing from these measures**. For example if you see someone coughing in public, advise them on cough etiquette and the need to stay home. If you see people hugging or shaking hands, advise them appropriately. If you see an overloaded minibus, a shop without a washing basin and soap, a crowded funeral, a crowded church...DON'T JUST WATCH: advise them or inform authorities. That way you will be keeping your family, Blantyre, and the whole nation safe from COVID-19.

Mayor Ndipo, allow me to tackle another question that many may have: **Is COVID-19 deadly?** A quick answer is YES it is. So far 34,018 people have died worldwide. The disease seems to be more severe for people who are older, say 60 years and over. It does seem to be either asymptomatic or mild in the young up to the age 20 years, then some severe illness and deaths are occurring between 20 years and 40 years, with an increase if aged 50 to 60, and the worst being over 60s. Over 50% severe illness and 80% of deaths seem to be targeting those aged 60 and above. **So as one way of limiting the impact of the disease, we could consider keeping a safe distance from our elderly**, do your best to ensure each and every grandfather or grandmother is hygienic, and supported without having to move around too much and mingling with the young. Let me add that all that we know so far is based on what we have learnt from other societies. The virus may behave differently here, hence the need to just be 100% vigilant, hygienic, and observing all that the mayor has announced.

Another reason for emphasising on prevention is that we do not have a cure or a vaccine, nor do we have enough facilities or bed space to support the sick. Overall, 80 of every 100 infected people do not get severely ill, they get well within a few days, just like any *chimfine*. But 14 to 20 out of every 100 need to be supported with hospital care including the need for oxygen and intensive care which involves breathing using machines which are very scarce in Malawi. **The only way of treating a COVID-19 patient when they come to hospital is to help their body stay strong as they fight the disease**, no drug that can kill it is available. Remember, to prevent spread of infection, we are encouraging those with symptoms to



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stay home until when they are feeling more sick than ordinary *chimfine*, for example being very breathless. At this point, call the toll-free line (0887371288 or Chipatala cha pa phone on 54747) and you will be supported accordingly.

Finally, let me speak to information sources. We are aware that there is a lot of false information circulating and sometimes causing unnecessary panic. Some rumours have it that Africans cannot die, and our hot weather will protect us. We know that right now we have 46 countries in Africa have the disease, sharing 4,264 cases, and 134 have already died on this continent. We therefore request residents of the Blantyre city as well as the people of Malawi to check and ensure that the information they are receiving on social media platforms is verified before sharing or forwarding further. **Only believe information if it is coming from Ministry of Health, Society of Medical Doctors and other leaders like the Mayor and his team here at the council.**

We urge all people in authority to engage medical personnel through SMD, Ministry of Health or other Ministry sanctioned organs when making their public statements to ensure that only accurate information comes out.

Drs Titus Divala, Parth Patel, Bright Mwafulirwa

Delivered on behalf of the SMD President

Blantyre Civic Offices, 30 March 2020