

Discovery COVID-19 Podcast Series
 Transcript: Dr. Odette Volmink
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	Speaker	Dialogue	
00:00	VO Intro	You're listening to the Discovery COVID-19 Podcast. Our expert guests help you understand Corona virus disease 2019 and how you can manage your health, wellbeing, and financial security during this time.	00:16
00:16	Dr. Odette Volmink	Hi. My name is Odette Volmink. I'm a medical doctor and an occupational medicine specialist who's based at the National Institute for Occupational Health. In this interview with Discovery Health, I'll be exploring what it means to keep high risk members of the household safe during COVID-19 pandemic.	00:35
00:35	Amalia	Dr. Volmink, thank you for your time. I think you'd agree one of the groups that's been hardest hit, economically by the COVID-19 pandemic is roughly 1.2 million household employees who work in South Africa. And this includes domestic workers, drivers, gardeners and other staff and these employees and their employers have in general really anticipated being able to return to work. However, the pandemic has produced a generalised anxiety about our health and the impact of movement between our home and the homes of others. So, today I want to look specifically at the dynamics around bringing an employee back to work who is at high risk of severe illness should they contract COVID-19 and how the interaction in the home with others in the household should be managed. Would you agree that there's a shared responsibility when it comes to the risk of exposure to COVID-19? Household employers must act to minimise risk to the staff and employees must act to minimise risk to the household in which they work.	01:41
01:42	Dr. Volmink	Yes, I agree totally that responsibility lies on both sides because particularly within a household setting, where physical distancing is very difficult to maintain. Household [employees] live in communities outside the home and may become infected within their communities and transmit this infection to their workplace and similarly employers may become infected outside of their home, maybe in their individual workplaces or in their communities and then transmit this infection into the household, putting household employees who work there at risk of infection from COVID-19.	02:27

02:27	Amalia	In that sense, when we talk about risk of infection to COVID-19, we need to pay particular attention to those who are at high risk for severe illness, should they contract COVID-19. Can we go over which factors put people who live or work in the home into the high-risk category?	02:49
02:50	Dr. Volmink	Okay. People who we see are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and these people have poorer outcomes from this disease include the elderly, also people who have chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes mellitus, chronic cardiac disease, chronic pulmonary disease, which includes asthma, chronic renal diseases and people also who have malignancies or cancers, people who are living with HIV and those who have had TB or currently have TB. These are just some of the people who are at increased risk.	03:31
03:32	Amalia	So, if a household employee lives with one of those risk factors, would you advise that that individual return to work at the time of this pandemic or should they wait? Some household employees cannot afford to not return to work from a financial perspective. What's your advice there?	03:55
03:56	Dr. Volmink	I think it's, you know, it's a very difficult time and I think it's good to be able to understand and for the employer to be able to understand whether the employee is at high risk or not. And if they are at high risk, if there are accommodations to the workplace that can be looked at to try to decrease the risk to the employee. You know some options are the living in option. I know in my personal experience, we had a nanny who would commute daily and luckily her social circumstances were such that she willing and she was then agreeable to live in with us during this time of the pandemic, as she's very far from her family. And that is just one way where we were able to decrease the risk of travelling and transmission during her commute every day and also during her interactions in the community. As she was, you know open communication is important during this time to see what circumstances are the employees that we have in our households, what kind of circumstances do they have at home that could increase their risk. And then also you know it's also important to have an unemployment insurance fund for the employees that we have in our households because during this time if they are at such a high risk where it's not a good idea to have the employee, accommodate the employee in the household, then some kind of payment options are available or made available to them.	05:56

05:57	Amalia	And if the employee cannot live in for any reason and does need to commute, perhaps there is no accommodation for them at the workplace, what measures can we take in the household to lower their risk of exposure to COVID-19?	06:13
06:14	Dr. Volmink	You know, there are many things we can do. Some may be, if travel is an issue and if people commute on public transport, then maybe it's important to look at travelling time. Maybe we need to relook at the working hours and changes them, such that employees don't actually have to commute during peak travel times. That they can commute during times when it's less busy in public transport, so their risk is reduced. That is just one way of being able to mitigate for the risk of travel. I think that it's quite important just to have open communication with the employer and the employee to look at where exactly is the biggest risk coming in and have ideas to try and mitigate those risks at each point.	07:24
07:24	Amalia	What additional preventive measures can we put in place day to day throughout the workday to assist in this sense?	07:33
07:34	Dr. Volmink	I think that's a good question. I think that, you know sometimes we have employers that are household employees but they work outside of the home and I think here it may be a little bit easier to put in preventative measures like the physical distancing. It may be a little bit easier to do. But it's important to ensure that workers have access, even worker outside of the house, have access to soap and water or hand sanitiser so they can frequently wash their hands. Not only when they start their work shift but also throughout their working day. I think it's also important where we provide food for the employees that they access to their own cutlery and crockery for eating and that they wash these themselves after eating to decrease the risk of spread. I think it's also, where available, it may be good to ensure that when a household employee enters the home, if they are commuting, they're able to put on work clothes and work shoes and that these working items of clothing are kept in the home and they are washed in the home. Maybe also, as an attempt to accommodate, we spoke about working hours that this could be an essential way to mitigate the risk so that the need for peak travel is eliminated. And I think it's also, it's very important, I know I already mentioned that we need to have open communication between all members of the household including the employees who work there. And this communication is quite essential that the household employees need to be trained effectively by the employers, and the training should be around COVID-19. What are the symptoms of	12:45

		<p>COVID-19? You know? What are the commonest symptoms, like a sore throat, cough, shortness of breath, a loss of smell or a loss of taste and other symptoms like fever, weakness of the body, body pains and diarrhoea. I think on top of that the common symptoms are, employees and all members of the household need to be trained on how is this disease transmitted from one person to the other and how can each of us, including the employee protect themselves and what is in place to protect themselves at work as well as in their homes and in their communities, like social distancing, proper cough etiquette, washing their hands frequently. You know, people need to be aware of that. And if it's possible within the household, it's good to do some sort of basic screening when people enter our households. You know to look at whether or not they have any symptoms. And I think it's also important that employees be taught how to self-monitor for the symptoms. And there's an open communication between employer and employee so that should an employee have symptoms, they feel an openness to be able to report these symptoms to their employer. And employees who are symptomatic should be encouraged to stay at home and ideally you know should be able to have this open environment where they're able to say even before they leave for work that 'listen, my throat is a little bit sore' and the employee, the employer say 'no I think that maybe you should stay at home today, see how it goes, and maybe go to a medical practitioner. And I also think that in the home environment you know cleaning is quite an essential part. And it's essential to ensure that surfaces are frequently cleaned. And staff also need to be trained on how to clean the surfaces and how to disinfect the surfaces with appropriate cleaning agents and if they're using things like Jik or you know things that are irritants to the skin, maybe PPE needs to be looked at and maybe gloves need to be given and if cleaning gloves are given, they need to know how to take care of these gloves, how to wash them, how to dry them at the end of their shift so that they can be fresh for the next day. And they also need to be trained on cleaning frequently touched surfaces in the home more often than maybe they previously did in the past.</p>	
12:45	Amalia	<p>Where a family member, a person living in the household is someone who falls within the high-risk category for COVID-19, should employers think twice about bringing a household employee into the home?</p>	13:01
13:02	Dr. Volmink	<p>I think, you know, I think people do definitely need to look at their specific circumstance. Where somebody can be isolated in a specific part of the house with their own bathroom and toilet, just that family</p>	14:04

		<p>member who is at increased risk and limited engagement actually happen with the staff member, that is also an option to pursue whereas if maybe the household staff member, you know changes duties where they stick to a specific part of the house to do the ironing and you cleaning of just that specific section. You know, these are just some of the things that can be used to accommodate these kinds of situations that would allow for increased distance between the household employee and that high-risk member of the household.</p>	
14:04	Amalia	<p>That makes sense. So let's look at what should a household employer do if a high-risk household employee develops possible symptoms of COVID-19 whether the staff member is someone who lives with the household or lives out?</p>	14:20
14:21	Dr. Volmink	<p>Okay. Now in these unfortunate situations, it's quite essential that if somebody is symptomatic, particularly in this case when the employee is symptomatic that the employee gets assessed medically. And should they have the common symptoms for COVID-19, they need to be referred for testing by their medical or their treating practitioner. And while they are being referred for testing, they need to be isolated away from the household and ideally in a safe space until the results are available so that no further management of the person's symptoms can then be done. So it's essential that the employee has access to somebody. Either the employer or a member of their family who would be, you know should the employees condition deteriorate, just say that they are COVID positive, we know that that deterioration of their condition can occur, that they have access to someone. If they are living inside the home and they may be isolated, inside, still inside the household, that they do have access to someone who can escalate, if their status deteriorates, that they can then escalate it and get them the medical help that they need.</p>	16:04
16:05	Amalia	<p>IS there a contact number that household employers should be saving on their phones? And they know that this is the number to contact if my household employee develops symptoms and I want to be able to assist?</p>	16:19
16:20	Dr. Volmink	<p>I think that's definitely, I think the NICD has a, have a [16:27] which gives advice to the public, with regards to various treatments, where must somebody be referred to their medical practitioner, when is the testing actually recommended and it's a toll free COVID-19, public hotline number and this number is 0800 029 999 and this I think</p>	17:45

		<p>should be in all our phones at the moment. You know we really need to have this and it gives us frequent medical advice should we be symptomatic because also it causes quite a bit of anxiety you know just worrying about ‘this symptom that I have, could it be COVID? Could it be?’ And this is probably the first point of call that we would be able to advise people should they go and seek medical attention and testing should be done in this situation and also put people’s minds at ease when they know that they can get immediate assistance when they need it.</p>	
17:46	Amalia	<p>Dr. Volmink, how can an employer find out more about their employee’s health condition, particularly if they fall into a high-risk category for severe illness for COVID-19 and do this without infringing on their rights to medical confidentiality?</p>	18:02
18:04	Dr. Volmink	<p>Thank you for this question, I think it’s so important. You know, I think that we need to, with our employees we need to foster good relationships and open communication, because you’re absolutely right, you know medical conditions that somebody suffers with is confidential information. But you know, one way that the employer can find out about whether their employee is actually suffering from a condition that puts them at high risk is that they can ask their employee to get a letter either from their clinic, their hospital or their doctor requesting whether or not the employee has an uncontrolled medical condition that puts them at higher risk of severe infection and the treating practitioner could say yes it does or no it doesn’t. This way, you know saving the confidentiality between the doctor and the patient. And it’s also quite important when talking about what—who is at high risk you know we mentioned a little bit earlier, that people with, you know, the elderly and people who have chronic medical conditions like hypertension, diabetes mellitus, we mentioned others are at risk but it’s also important to note that people who have these conditions and their conditions are really not well managed and uncontrolled puts them at even higher risk. So, just say a diabetic, you can have 2 diabetics, 1 diabetic who is taking an oral hypoglycaemic agent and that—they’re taking one medication, they’re taking it regularly and you know, every time they go to their doctor for their check up or the clinic for their check-up, they’re very well controlled, would be at a lesser risk than somebody who maybe is on 5 different tablets and still is treating them—struggling to get them controlled on that medication, struggling to get their blood sugar levels down. And you know how a condition affects us or you know it affects individuals differently. So, people who have uncontrolled chronic medical conditions that we spoke to are at higher risk. So, I</p>	22:05

		<p>think it's actually also important for employees or all of us at this time you know, particularly if we have medical conditions that put us at high risk to go to our treating place, you know, wherever we're getting our treatment from be that the hospital, be that the clinic, be that the GP and you know, just have—ensure that the treatment that we have is optimised so that we decrease our risk of severe or poor outcomes due to, you know should we contract COVID-19 and yeah, I think that's mainly what I wanted to say. SO I think it's a good idea just for everybody to have their treatment optimised, also to make sure that they have enough medication for this period of the pandemic, and they can you know to take care of themselves. You know, be compliant on their medication and just you know look after their general health.</p>	
22:05	Amalia	<p>The private sector has in many respects provided support to the nation and support to everything that the state is doing to give South Africans access to healthcare though the COVID-19 pandemic and Discovery Health, in partnership with Vodacom has since the start of the pandemic offered all South Africans access to an interesting platform. It's a free COVID-19 online doctor consultations, where people can be screened and referred on to the right care and the screening process is done via the Discovery or Vodacom websites so it's remote. Would you advise that household employers explore this platform and perhaps help their household employees, if they are there, located in the same place to access this sort of platform together? To perhaps go through the screening process because it is free for all South Africans.</p>	22:58
23:00	Dr. Volmink	<p>I think that's it's actually very important you know in terms of always, and particularly at this time of the pandemic all people in South Africa, the employees, the employers to have access to healthcare and medical services that would allow patients to be screened and effectively triaged and you know where there are symptoms, if people are symptomatic for COVID-19, that these individuals be referred promptly for testing for COVID. And it would be ideal for employers to assist their helper or employee to ensure that they have access to these services should they be required by the employee. So, I think these kind of discussions are necessary at this time. We need to know what employee in our household, what access to healthcare they do have so that if there should be any gaps, you know, we can take it upon ourselves to fill up these gaps.</p>	24:09
24:09	Amalia	<p>You're referring to household employers taking time to understand where their household employees access healthcare. The majority of</p>	25:24

		<p>household employees would be accessing their healthcare through state healthcare facilities which are overburdened at the best of times and more so during the OVID-19 pandemic. For those household employers who would want to give their employees access to private primary healthcare, Discovery offers a product called Discovery Primary Care for household employees from R249 a month, the product gives household employees and their dependents access to private primary healthcare, which offers an array of day-to-day medical benefits and also to the WHO Global Outbreak benefit which provides funding for test and out of hospital treatment for confirmed cases of COVID-19. Dr. Volmink, do you think that household employers should consider ways to assist their employees to access a variety of healthcare options where possible and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic? That means really getting involved in understanding where the employee accesses healthcare and how they access it.</p>	
25:25	Dr. Volmink	<p>Yes, I think, you know I think you made very good points particularly about how access to healthcare can be a challenge in our setting particularly at this point in time. So, here it can be secured for employees, I think it's great to do so. This may allow, you know these services may allow employees to access assessment and testing where its needed, and quite promptly and although these medical services are already available within the public healthcare system, there are some challenges, having worked in the system, that you know there are soe long waiting times with regards to getting test results and this could sometimes hinder the effect of management of the employees health and also delay the isolation period away from the workplace that may be needed when a positive test is noted. But it's also an ideal time for the employer to explore, you know, like you said what services the employee has access to and where public and private healthcare options may be able to work together. It's also you know, having said this, it's important to ensure that there's a sustainability to these services offered to these employees as sustainability of services is quite important for continuity of care particularly with regards to patients who are on chronic medications for chronic conditions.</p>	27:11
27:11	Amalia	<p>You refer to employees who are on chronic medication who may frequently need sick leave. The issue of sick leave is one that household employees must consider at this time. What should household employers be aware of when it comes to the legislation around sick leave, family responsibility leave, especially during a pandemic?</p>	27:32

37:33	Dr. Volmink	<p>Yes, I think that's a very valuable question and people are struggling quite a bit with this. And I think that during this time it's important, you know not only employers who employ people in the household, but also companies to have sensible leave policies in place with regards to sick leave and family responsibility leave for their employees. Because, you know during this time sick leave needs may be heightened and also for longer periods that were previously needed by employees because when somebody tests positive for COVID-19, they need at least 10 days of isolation away from the workplace and this eats into quite a bit of the employees sick leave and even quarantine times are quite long so there needs to be a little bit of flexibility you know looking at what is needed from the public health side, the length of time off that is needed and these need to be made available to the employee and where somebody is positive, there's directives from the Department of Employment and Labour that this should be sick leave. There's also, you know, at this time as we go into the storm of the pandemic, family members to employees may get sick and need someone to look after them. Also, you know, there's a lot of uncertainty with regard to schooling, you know, whether the schools are going to open, stay closed or what exactly is going to happen and these are additional burdens that are put on our employees and so leave should be a little bit flexible to try to accommodate for the needs that people have during this time.</p>	29:42
29:42	Amalia	<p>In closing, I would say that from listening to you today, it sounds like it's very plausible to bring a high risk household employee back into the home to do their work, to earn their salary and with the right preventive measures in place to keep them safe and healthy. Would you agree?</p>	30:02
30:03	Dr. Volmink	<p>I think you're absolutely right. I think it is. I thin that, but in order for us to make a safe environment in our homes, for our employees who are at risk, we need to be able to speak to them openly. We need to try and identify with them where are the areas of risk that could be, that could bring COVID-19 to enter our households and work with them in trying to have a risk mitigation strategy in the household so that everyone is on board and we have a collaborative sort of working arrangement with our employees. So we share responsibility like you mentioned earlier and we have that buy in from both sides. I think that's essential and COVID-19 gives us an ideal opportunity to get these kind of relationships going in our household with our household employees.</p>	31:11

31:12	Amalia	Thank you so much Dr. Volmink, that's excellent advice. Really excellent guidance for household employers. We really appreciate your time today.	31:20
31:21	Dr. Volmink	It's only a pleasure.	31:23
31:25	VO Outro	This podcast was brought to you by Discovery. Stay informed. Stay healthy.	31:30