

**Intercare Chief Executive, Hendrik Hanekom, pursues a hybrid health care model to thrive after the Covid-19 pandemic**

Intercare is a leading healthcare provider committed to providing quality, value-added healthcare to patients. The Intercare Group operates medical and dental centres, day hospitals, sub-acute and rehabilitation hospitals and a specialised facility.

With more than 1000 team members, and several hundred thousand patient visits and admissions facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the group has had to overcome many challenges. With me, is Dr Hendrik Hanekom, the Chief Executive and co-founder of the Intercare Group.

**Welcome Hendrik, I am interested to get your insights into how you lead an organization, like Intercare through a crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic.**

Thank you Linda. One of the most important lessons I've learnt is that no individual, however gifted, can solve all problems. You need to surround yourself with capable and trustworthy people. The Intercare executive don't lead the organisation, we lead people who care for people and for us, COVID-19 is a human story. Preventing the disease in our teams and treating our patients remains our top priority, but COVID-19 also means addressing needs which go far beyond the biological threat of the virus, and which constantly evolve throughout the pandemic.

**How did you see this pandemic unfold and what was your response to it?**

Well, the few weeks pre- and post the first cases in South Africa in early March were marked by much anxiety and uncertainty for both the public as well as healthcare workers, made worse by the enormous amount of information, and should I say even more misinformation. The discussion quickly became polarized and centred on the biological threat of the virus to health and life. Some believed that COVID-19 was over-estimated and was only like "flu"; others were very anxious.

Our strategy was to ensure the communication of accurate and balanced information and to ensure that our teams and patients were protected and felt physically secure. This involved training, the implementation of enhanced infection prevention protocols and securing enough supplies of personal protective equipment.

**And the national lockdown; what impact did that have on Intercare?**

The lockdown significantly slowed the pandemic's growth rate and our team's confidence grew in being able to safely manage COVID-19. Up until that point, our main concern had been maintaining a safe environment for our teams and patients.

We had projected extremely high patient volumes and capacity constraints to be our main challenges. We hadn't even considered that a health pandemic would severely impact providers of healthcare. The reality that emerged was quite different. Lockdown measures, as well as anxiety about the virus, changed the health-seeking behaviour of our patients, and our volumes dropped significantly across the business, on average by 50%, but at some stages by 95%.

The psycho-social and financial impact of the regulations then became the main challenge. We appreciated that our team members were facing challenging financial and social circumstances due to the broader societal impact of the virus as well as lockdown regulations. However, in order to ensure liquidity and sustainability of the business, we had to implement measures to improve efficiency and maintain revenue. While there was ultimately a financial impact to team members, by taking decisive action and using all levers at our disposal, we were able to delay and minimize the size of this impact.

**A 50 - 95% drop in volumes? How did you change your strategy once the lockdown regulations started to ease to overcome that?**

Well, when the lockdown regulations eased and society and the economy began to re-start, the number of coronavirus cases increased rapidly, including that of our own team members. The relational dynamics within the organization were stressed, that I can assure you. Stigma, blame and mistrust emerged, directed both at fellow team members as well as leadership, or rather the protocols which had been put in place.

We realised that we had to support both those who fell ill, as well as reassure and support those who had not. We held a group-wide webinar where team members who had recovered from COVID-19 shared their physical and psychological experience of the condition, including their experiences with stigmatisation. Training and the regular communication of accurate, balanced information continued to play a crucial role.

The team members who tested positive were given vouchers, and we set up a “recovery buddy” system where anyone who contracted COVID-19 could opt for the support of another team member who had already recovered.

**Well, Hendrik it seems you got through that; so what does the current phase look like for Intercare, its teams and patients?**

Well, Linda, once we had passed the peak, there was a strong desire to resume normal activities, contributed to by pandemic fatigue and a perception that the risk had passed. The teams had many questions about the continued relevance and need for certain protocols and financial measures which had been instituted during the pandemic, as well as the risk of a second wave and further lockdowns.

**Do you think Intercare successfully navigated this crisis?**

Yes, I would say we did. However, we are not through it, but we had to do a couple of things to navigate this crisis. Firstly I think the most important thing was that our teams have shown unbelievable commitment to their patients even when they were facing significant challenges in their personal lives. I remember early on in the pandemic, when many other GP practices were showing patients suspected of having COVID-19 away; our doors remained open to all and our teams continued to be a dependable source of quality care.

The next think was about collaboration. As a leadership team, we collaborated with scientific and regulatory bodies, as well as other private healthcare organizations to always ensure we have the most up-to-date measures in place to maximize the health and safety of our teams and patients. And then thirdly communication; regular, clear and honest communication to everybody in the organization has been a key part of our response. We also communicated to our patients through a variety of channels, including the set-up of a COVID-19 hotline.

And then lastly but definitely not the least important, competence. I believe that we have extremely competent teams, both the healthcare workers on the frontline and the team members providing support services.

**What have you learned from this pandemic and what advice would you give on how one should lead a company like yours through a crisis like this?**

As a leadership team, we’ve realised that you can’t manage your way out of a crisis; you have to lead. The leadership team must also be unified, capable and calm, not only in words but in actions too. They must be accessible and approachable and communicate with teams, often. Messaging should be transparent and honest. We did not always have the answers, but we were truthful about that. We also had to be flexible and move quickly, adapting to a dynamic regulatory environment, advances in scientific evidence, as well as patient and staff expectations.

**Hendrik, you also led Intercare through the 2008/2009 credit crunch crisis. What have you learned to prime you to be able to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic?**

Linda, I don't think anything could have primed you for this pandemic. During the 2008/ 2009 crunch, the organisation was much younger. We learned a lot during those times, but unfortunately also, one forgets these crunches. You sometimes overextend yourself because you forget that these things might happen. So, to be honest, the most important thing for me also during those times that kept us on the road, was that we had to be calm, but also confident. Your people must not get jittery. If they see the leadership team becoming jittery; I think you've had it.

**Do you think Intercare is a better business now than it was prior to the pandemic?**

I definitely think we've become more agile in our approach. We've built an even greater degree of trust with both our patients and our teams. We had time to focus on some key strategic areas which will position us well moving forward. We have accelerated the uptake of remote patient care. We have digitised our way of working, with much more flexible, remote arrangements. And then I believe that our teams are even stronger and more unified leaders in healthcare.

When you look at healthcare in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, COVID-19 forced a lot of changes. Do you think that these changes that providers were forced to make, are permanent and they were actually good?

I don't think there is one healthcare organization that escaped the negative effect of this pandemic. But to answer your question, a lot of these things were also good and if we look at the future healthcare model; it will be a hybrid model. And let me explain what I mean by a hybrid model. In the past, everything was in-person. You went to see the doctor in person, then COVID came and everything went remote, care was virtual. The future will not be either virtual or in-person. It will be the hybrid model, where there will be flexibility and patients and doctors will move seamlessly between these two worlds. And for me, that is part of life, not only in healthcare, but in so many other aspects of life.

**So, a disruption that shook the healthcare world, but a company like yours managed to navigate it and could be on a much better path now?**

I really believe we are on a much better path going forward, where we will meet the needs of our customers, who would like to access the system. We will be able to provide the service that they need, and also for our healthcare professionals that work with us in the system; we will also give them the flexibility to move seamlessly in those new healthcare hybrid model.

**Thank you very much, Hendrik Hanekom, the Chief Executive of Intercare**

Thank you, Linda. Thank you for the opportunity.