

# The Virtual Doctors' Covid-19 Response

## IMPACT REPORT



The Virtual Doctors' COVID-19 Response Fund was launched on 22 April 2020 to support our **ongoing partnership with the Zambian Government** (helping them improve access to quality health care) and their effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19, with the aim to ensure that we can continue to provide vital telemedicine and educational support to the (then) 140 health centres we work with in rural Zambia. (**We now support 215 health centres**). Dr Matshidiso Moeti, the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa stated in March 2020 that COVID-19 could be one of the biggest health challenges Africa has faced in a generation. Although Covid 19 infection rates and deaths have been relatively low in Zambia with 15,301 confirmed cases and 335 deaths, the threat of further infections and mortality remains.



After surveying 100 of sites we support in order to assess their readiness to respond to Covid-19 back in March, the Virtual Doctors (VDrs) devised a **dual approach** to fight the spread of the pandemic in rural communities: **Water Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) and Education**, by providing our service users (frontline health workers) with Covid-19 prevention WASH kits to their health facilities and educational resources directly onto their VDrs-issued devices in addition to Covid information posters and stickers in English as well as key local languages.

*"Virtual doctors as an organisation is a true and dedicated partner in fight against the disease burden in our communities. It feels so great to be part of this organization and thank u for making our work much lighter as clinicians."*  
(Service user Lawrence, Chibombo health facility)

***So far we have raised an amazing £40,000 thanks to our supporters!***

We have also *received* some very exciting [Media Coverage](#) including Social Media campaigns Johnson & Johnson's [#BackTheFrontline](#) and [ONE's #PassTheMic](#): one of our Volunteer Virtual Doctors, Dr Martin Dedicoat was handed over Welsh actor [Michael Sheen's Twitter account](#) for a day to share his [expertise and experience](#) during the pandemic.

*We are incredibly grateful for your support as well as to our Field Team in Zambia, who have worked wonders on the procurement of equipment to secure an average price of **£190 per Covid-prevention kit**.*

These consist of

- A foot pump-operated wash basin – K2,000/£80
- 3 months of consumables (antiseptic liquid, hand wash, hand sanitizers, gloves, mask, towels, bar soap) – K 2255/£90
- Covid-19 prevention through hygiene posters – K 500/£20

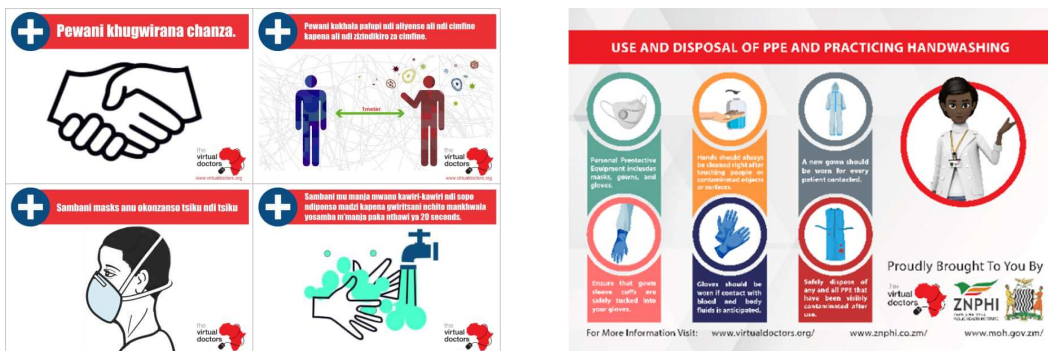


By July 2020 we had equipped all the 140 health facilities we supported at the time. We have since deployed our service *along with the Covid prevention WASH kits* to a further 75 health facilities, taking us to 215 sites across the country using the VDrs telemedicine service while also being fully equipped to fight the spread of Covid. We were able to deliver below budget, allowing us to go further with our generous donors' contribution.

*Left: kit arriving in Chilanga District Health Office.*

The funding also allowed us to further collaborate with the Ministry of Health on the design, production and dissemination of vital Government sanctioned Covid prevention and management information: first of all posters and stickers in English and the main local languages to deliver along with the WASH kits as well as how-to videos, but most importantly, the digitisation (video animations) of government-sanctioned paper-based curriculum and resources. These enable our service users to avoid the risk Covid from travel and physical training courses, but also means more time spent focused on their patients instead.

*Below sample stills of the animations:*



**We were able to reduce these costs to £215 per service user.**

While ensuring our clinical users are safe so that they continue to save lives we encountered **significant challenges** around costs: firstly product price inflation and shortage of key supplies (in Zambia more than in Europe), which we addressed with bulk buying as much as funds allowed. We also faced transportation costs rising exponentially with the increasing distances of our sites from Lusaka and the VDRs HQ (K 41,450/£1634).

***Going above and beyond:***

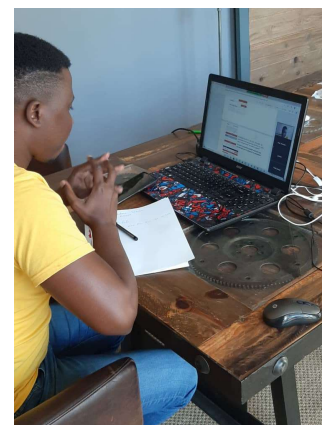
We have made our Covid Response initiative part of the **New Normal** and now provide WASH supplies with our telemedicine devices whenever we introduce the service to a new site in rural Zambia. This ensures that each health facility is better equipped to combat the pandemic.

Covid travel restrictions have changed the way we train Clinical Officers (CO's) and set up our service in new health facilities: instead of sending our team into the field to deliver devices and training, we work with Ministry of Health colleagues to send Covid kits and telemedicine devices to the local District Health Office by bus, where they are then sent on to the designated Rural Health Centres.

We have also developed a **new, virtual, training model** based on a "Training the Trainers" (ToT) concept: Clinical Care Officers (CCOs) (most senior COs responsible for managing all COs in their district) are trained remotely over Zoom by the VDRs team in Lusaka, so that they are able to train COs in their Districts to use the VDRs telemedicine service. On the day of training, 6-10 CO's are trained together at the DHO by the CCO's. The training is backed up with support from the team in Lusaka via Zoom.

A comprehensive training manual and user guide are sent to the CCO's via WhatsApp with a supporting training video 'how to create a Virtual Doctors (VDRs) case' in two of the seven official vernacular languages of Zambia, Bemba and Nyanja, as well as English.

This new model not only allows us to by-pass Coronavirus-related obstacles but will also enable us to redirect cost savings towards COVID-19 prevention activities and beyond – an exciting development and direction for the Virtual Doctors: turning a threat into an opportunity and going further Virtually while continuing to enrich the quality of healthcare service delivery where it's needed most.



*Clinical Liaison Specialist Pralin Koongo dispensing virtual training from the VDRs Lusaka office.*

## **OUTLOOK:**

The Virtual Doctors wish to continue playing a key role in helping keep Covid infection rates down through our prevention support initiative. But most importantly, we want to continue to provide our life-changing telemedicine service at a critical time: according to a [new report](#) released in June by the Global Fund, “*deaths from HIV, TB and Malaria could almost double in 12 months*” and go “*back to levels not seen since the peak of the epidemics, wiping out nearly two decades of progress in the worst-hit regions*”. In more developed regions as well as the less developed regions in sub-Saharan Africa, chronic and long-term health conditions have been neglected as a direct result of the concentrated effort to counter the Covid pandemic and patients’ fear to visit doctors or hospitals. In sub-Saharan Africa, maternal and under-5s mortality is on the rise again, because of the disruption to health systems ([the Lancet](#)).

Our service continues to expand in Zambia with a further 47 sites to be set up with our telemedicine service by the end of 2020, this will take our service to every Province in Zambia. We are also in the process of expanding our service into neighbouring Malawi in partnership with the Malawi Ministry of Health. We plan to set up in 59 sites in the Central Province of Malawi over the next year.

We need your support to continue to allow us to provide Covid prevention kits and Covid education materials to every new site we support with our telemedicine service. Starting with Zambia, we desperately need an additional £2,000 pounds for the next phase of expansion to the 47 health facilities throughout the remaining provinces in Zambia. We will then need funding to allow us to include Covid prevention kits to the health facilities we expand our service to in Malawi.

Thank you so much for your kind support for our emergency campaign so far, we could not have done it without you!

*The Virtual Doctors’ work is more vital than ever and so is YOUR ongoing support.*

*We thank you for taking the time to read about our work.*

*“The WASH commodities that were distributed to us have really helped the facility. We are really grateful for all the things you gave us to help fight the coronavirus. This shows us that you really care about us”*

Service User Pacidah (pictured left), Nampundwe health facility

