

Leading Illovo's medical response to the Coronavirus Outbreak Dr Ernest Peresu – Group Medical Services Specialist

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Across Illovo's six countries of operation, Dr Ernest Peresu is spearheading the Group's medical response to the challenges of COVID-19. In discussion with Dr Peresu from Ubombo, he outlines that the business has adapted to the current environment and challenges, as well as why medicine and his role is so important to him. **But where did it all begin?**



Dr Ernest Peresu, looking relaxed in his medical practice Head Office in Durban, prior leaving for home at Ubombo Sugar Limited in Eswatini in early March, 2020.

During my time with Ubombo Sugar in Eswatini, I was able to fully grasp the value of our medical facilities to employees, their families and neighbouring communities. I worked in the hospital on our sugar estate and as a result of this, I was able to make a seamless transition to my current role at head office as the group medical services specialist.

"Today, my role involves leading group-wide employee health and wellness management by providing strategy, minimum standards, direction and advice especially in integrating the fields of occupational health, workplace and working conditions, wellness, disease management and community health. I also facilitate the sharing of evidence-based medical services best practices across the business, taking into account country-specific context and circumstances," said Ernest.

Speaking on the challenges of setting up the Group's medical services in response to the COVID-19 challenge, Ernest says that the virus is still spreading at an extraordinary speed, bringing with it uncertainty and rapidly evolving conditions that are more complex and bigger than what we are used to dealing with. "We have a COVID-19 emergency *plan-ahead* team that has been instrumental in delivering an evidence-informed, strategic-crisis action plan with speed in an effort to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our employees which is our highest priority.

"In most rural communities we operate, our medical facilities are the communities' only lifeline. We also realise that our medical facilities are uniquely positioned to help flatten the curve with our experience in dealing with malaria and cholera outbreaks and the HIV epidemic. We have reconfigured and made sure that each of our 4 hospitals and 27 clinics across the group created two streams of care – one for patients with respiratory symptoms and another for those with general illnesses. We have launched new service models to reach patients and employees remotely; implemented infection prevention and control protocols in all facilities; have adequate supply of oxygen, oxygen concentrators and ventilators; enough PPE such as facemasks; and designated quarantine and isolation facilities for accommodating people whose accommodation does not support self-isolation.



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“In addition, we designed and implemented health communication strategies leveraging on long-standing relationships with local communities to reach a wide audience with evidence-based messages. Each of our operations also collaborates and aligns their COVID-19 response with the World Health Organization and local public health authorities’ protocols.

“With operations across six countries, one challenge in particular has been the different ways each country is responding to the outbreak. The different policy responses to COVID-19 have made it a bit difficult for us to implement some of the internationally-recommended evidence-based practices in some of our facilities. However, I’m happy that we’re managing to navigate through this and align our responses to local Ministry of Health protocols.”

Ernest goes on to say that the response of the country medical teams across has been fantastic, however, there are a number of things which worry him daily: “Firstly, the fear of the virus is spreading faster than the disease itself, bringing with it stigma to those who have been confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19. From our experience in dealing with HIV, we know that people who are worried about being socially stigmatised are less likely to get tested or seek treatment if they experience symptoms. So, we are busy trying to remind people that our values of inclusion, acceptance and diversity also extend to people who are affected by the virus.

“Secondly, our doctors and nurses, medical staff in general, who are at the front line of the response, are particularly exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. So, we will continue doing our best to reinforce hygiene measures in our medical facilities to prevent our hospitals and clinics from becoming places where the disease is transmitted.

“Despite this, I am extremely motivated by the incredibly strong and resilient medical and human resources team that surround me and work with me every day to fulfil our purpose. The joy, appetite and desire, especially of our doctors, nurses and all medical staff – who are as passionate and invested in the company’s success as me – to serve others inspires me every day!”

And in looking to the future, what’s your ‘medical’ take? “In many countries across Africa, health systems are not primarily designed to keep people healthy, but instead focused on responding to diseases. So as a doctor, the more patients you see today, the more and more patients you will see tomorrow because the health system is built to wait for people who are sick rather than reaching out to people to live healthy lives. I see us shifting even more towards empowering people to own their personal health and live healthy lifestyles. This is a fundamental change and will take time.

“For our services specifically, we’re also evaluating the best ways to solve the health challenges our employees and communities face. Our ambition is to continue to develop our medical services’ capability to enable the provision and accessibility of safe, quality and affordable healthcare that address country-specific needs. To achieve this, we will continue to re-engineer and optimise our service to ensure they are fit-for-purpose, and where we can, leverage on creating strong public-private partnerships to address the healthcare needs of those around us,” said Dr Peresu.

Illovo Sugar Africa (Pty) Ltd is a Pan-African consumer business with its roots in growing and making sugar and related products. It is Africa’s largest sugar producer and has extensive agricultural operations in six southern African countries – Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia - manufacturing sugar and downstream products from cane supplied by its own agricultural operations and independent growers. The group is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Associated British Foods plc (ABF), a diversified international food, ingredients and retail group operating in more than 50 countries.

Illovo Sugar Africa employs more than 12 000 people in permanent positions across the group with a further 18 000 people employed on a temporary basis. In a recent [independent socio-economic study](#), the company is estimated to support at least 71 443 jobs across the group and for each of Illovo’s 29 663 direct employees, at least 1.4 additional jobs are estimated to be supported through grower communities and wider multiplier effects throughout the economy. Illovo has a proud history of significant contribution to local economies in which it operates and its positive social impact across this region on rural communities is substantial. Illovo’s total economic impact, including direct, indirect and induced impacts, was estimated at R 23.8 billion in 2016/17.