

Scammers jump Covid jab queue

Private doctors and civilians have been exploiting gaps in the public health system to get vaccinated

Chris Bateman

Doctors and specialists in the private sector are abusing the national electronic vaccine data system (EVDS) to secure Covid-19 inoculations for their wives and employees who don't come into contact with patients. Members of the public also exploit the loopholes.

The abuse is taking place at the Universitas Academic Hospital in the Mangaung metro and in Gauteng's Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital.

Word of inadequate on-site verification and instructions on how to fraudulently register is spreading rapidly through private SMS's.

The *Mail & Guardian* has seen an SMS written in Afrikaans by a scammer claiming he was vaccinated last week and providing details of how to manipulate the system.

"We were injected this morning. Please keep it quiet. Register on the link, full names and use Universitas hospital as options. When you get the SMS, you go to the following link," the message reads.

It then gives the link of the South

African Medical Research Council and states what the voucher number should look like. "... is pending approval. You will be notified of the outcome by SMS."

Another SMS confirms that the scammer has been successfully "enrolled into the J&J Sisonke vaccine programme. We look forward to welcoming you at Universitas hospital. Your voucher number is AV... This voucher, along with your ID document/passport, is required at the vaccination site. For public sector HCW's [healthcare workers], please contact the vaccine site directly. The vaccination roster for private HCW's [sic] is through the hospital or GP organisations."

Free State health department spokesperson Mondli Mvambi confirmed fraudulent vaccinations had been given at Universitas hospital. "[But] our hands are tied on this one because they are using the national EVDS system ... we cannot turn them away because they have vouchers."

Ian Sanne, the head of the Sisonke Johnson & Johnson vaccine programme, said four cases of prima facie fraud have been uncovered. The identify numbers provided on the EVDS system were used. Sanne said



Safe: Sister Merinda Ludick is the second health worker to get the Covid jab in Nelson Mandela Bay. Photo: Lulama Zenzile/Die Burger/Gallo Images

the investigation was ongoing.

A source involved in vaccinations at an academic hospital said it was easy to get doctors' practice numbers, adding that .

Some doctors had expressed outrage when the authenticity of people accompanying them was questioned.

"They simply say the person is employed by them and is patient-facing, which is really difficult to verify. One doctor's wife told us she was a real estate agent who works at his practice at weekends," Sanne said.

Baragwanath spokesperson

Nkosinathi Mazibuko said doctors cheating the system were the biggest problem. "With our own staff, we can verify that they work for us, and we request each section to give us a list of names in advance."

Mazibuko said that since Monday, private doctors were being redirected to the Netcare Milpark Private Hospital to get a vaccination. He added that many health workers had chosen not to be inoculated.

The systemic abuse has been described as "outright fraud" and "simply immoral" by top scientists

and senior hospital operators.

Glenda Gray, head of the medical research council and leader of the vaccine rollout, said those who scammed the system should be dealt with. "It's dishonest — fraud, actually. We'll get the police to investigate.

"People are supposed to bring their IDs and the health professions council practice number with them. We're tightening up and verification will be based on a couple of things, like ID, MP [medical practice] number, personal [public sector employees] number and letters from their institution to ensure no one takes advantage."

Dr Angelique Coetzee, the chair of the South African Medical Association, said the problem was turning into a blame game. "We negotiated for 10 000 GPs and, so far, half of them have taken it up. We know that the system [EVDS] is causing the problem. No system is foolproof, and there will always be doctors and other people misusing the system."

One exhausted doctor, who was supervising up to 600 vaccinations a day, said: "You can't rule out poor verification on-site, so we've changed entirely to a paper-based system.

"I hate to think of what abuse will happen when we get to phase two with teachers and police officers," adding that verifying people's comorbidities "will prove very difficult".