

The backbone of SA's healthcare system

By [Bha Ndungane-Tlakula](#)

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Nurses have emerged as heroes in the fight against Covid-19. The grit, quick decision-making and compassion required to take care of patients in the face of a terrifying global pandemic has been highlighted in [media stories the world over](#).



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Notably, last year was a significant year for nurses. In addition to the year being the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth, and the World Health Organisation declaring 2020 the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife, Covid-19 shed light on the [crucial role of nurses in the face of extreme medical crises](#).

As the world observes International Nurses Day on 12 May 2021, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) has given the event the theme of [A Vision for Future Healthcare](#). The organisation says Covid-19 exposed weaknesses in global healthcare systems around the world compelling nurses to work under enormous pressure, and having to draw on their reserves of commitment and courage to do their jobs.

Hard hit

While the [Covid-19 pandemic presented several challenges](#) to the entire healthcare sector, nurses, in particular, were hard hit. These included the short supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), tedious 12-hour long shifts, not being able to see family, and more importantly, the inability to mourn the loss of those close to them, including colleagues.

Moreover, the pandemic and influx of ill patients meant [higher levels of stress and an added sense of fear, greatly impacting their ability to work to the best of their abilities](#).

Shortage of nurses

This is further exacerbated with a [shortage of nurses. In South Africa](#), for example, there are a mere 1.3 nurses and midwives for every 1,000 people, well below the global average of 3.8 per 1,000 people.

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Covid-19 has made the situation worse, with nurses having to address the needs of [an influx of even more patients](#), albeit [already understaffed](#).

With [more than 66% of South Africans living in urban areas and cities](#), the remaining 34% of the population in rural areas rely heavily on nurses as their first point of contact and care. Rural healthcare facilities are often understaffed and patients face difficulties such as transportation issues and vast distances to travel, amongst others, all of which [impact them in accessing these facilities](#).

Nurses do more than just care for patients, they advocate for health, educate, innovate and provide ongoing assessments for patients' health. [Nurses save lives](#), and as the largest profession in the sector, they will play a vital planning role for the future of the South African healthcare system.

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