

PRESS RELEASE

NATIONWIDE CHILD HEALTH WEEKS LAUNCHED

Greater Giyani, Limpopo Province, 7 September 2009 – Today, Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, the Minister of Health launched the first ever national two week child health campaign in an effort to improve the health of all South African children. Taking place in all the nine provinces, it will target 3 million children under the age of five years old with critical public health interventions.

The campaign led by the Ministry of Health with support from UNICEF, WHO, the private sector, local authorities, non government organizations, and communities themselves, will mobilize hundreds of health workers who will set up service delivery points in the communities and go door to door in the hard-to-reach populations to deliver health services. Children will receive an essential package of low cost but high impact health interventions including immunization, vitamin A supplements and deworming tablets which has proven to reduce under-five deaths, particularly those due to diarrhoea, pneumonia and measles.

“The legacy of apartheid means that there is still enormous disparity in the access and quality of health care services. Many children in poor and rural areas are still missing out on basic public health interventions that can prevent them from getting sick or dying from preventable diseases.” said Mrs. Aida Girma, UNICEF South Africa Representative. “This campaign is an important way to reach these children and ensure they have an opportunity to grow up healthy and develop to their full potential as responsible citizens of this country.”

In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goal number four to reduce child mortality by two thirds by 2015, South Africa needs to accelerate and intensify current efforts, prioritising four key interventions namely prevention of mother to child transmission, care of the newborn, integrated management of pneumonia and diarrhoea and infant and young child feeding.

The Child Health weeks are especially important for children living in what have been classified as the 18 priority health districts, where health services are weak and many children do not benefit from routine child health and nutrition services such as immunization, vitamin A supplementation and growth monitoring. They provide an opportunity to promote a comprehensive approach to complement the predominantly facility-based South African health system by adding schedulable services and community-based services by community health workers..”

In a country where routine immunization coverage is high with rates of 99%, 97% and 83% of DPT1, DPT3 and measles coverage respectively, recent measles outbreaks in Gauteng Province have demonstrated that national averages can mask disparity between and within districts and have underscored the need to keep levels high. In addition, child health weeks offer an opportunity to rapidly increase the coverage of the two newly introduced vaccines, pneumococcal conjugate and rotavirus, to prevent diarrhoea and pneumonia.

Twenty seven percent of children below five years are stunted and almost ten percent of all children are underweight which can contribute to children’s poor health status and high levels of mortality. To combat high rates of malnutrition amongst children under five years old, children will be screened using a mid upper arm circumference and if undernourished, they will be referred to nearby clinics for care and management. The campaign will also provide vitamin A capsules in an effort to increase vitamin A supplementation coverage which is only 31 percent with the aim of strengthening children’s ability to defend against diseases.

The Child Health Weeks are part of the new Government's renewed efforts to improve the health and survival of mothers and children. These efforts include; the on-going development of the first national strategic plan on maternal, neonatal, child and women's health and nutrition for 2009-2013; the national summit on maternal and child health that was recently convened by the Minister of Health; and the implementation of the national PMTCT Acceleration Plan which aims to improve the coverage and quality of PMTCT services to achieve the ambitious national target of reducing mother to child transmission rates to less than five percent.

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