

MEDIA RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE ISSUE

Government appeals to South Africans to STOP TB

Nelson Mandela Metropole (Port Elizabeth), 24 March 2003 – Today, World TB Day 2003 saw the launch of South Africa's first national Tuberculosis (TB) advocacy and social mobilisation campaign – also the first such campaign globally.

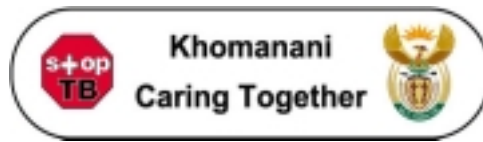
South Africa battles with more than 188 000 new TB cases a year, a disease which has been treatable for fifty years.

The national World TB Day event was held in the Eastern Cape Province, due to the Province's high number of TB cases. Eastern Cape accounts for 20% of the entire TB burden in the South Africa.

During today's commemorations, the Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and other senior officials from the Eastern Cape Province administered TB treatment to patients at several healthcare service facilities in the Nelson Mandela Metropole. Speaking with the patients, the Minister and her colleagues stressed that completing the treatment is an essential element of successfully fighting TB.

The Minister said that the Department of Health could not fight TB alone and needed assistance from every South African to motivate diagnosed patients to take their treatment and to talk about TB – the only way in which the country can destigmatise the disease. Stigma and fear were identified as two key barriers to effective TB control.

These are some of the main elements of the STOP TB – BECAUSE YOU CAN! advocacy and social mobilisation campaign, designed to assist South Africa in reaching global TB control targets for 2005: a 70% TB detection rate and an 85% cure rate of detected cases.



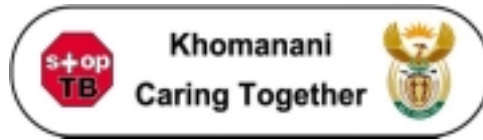
Dr Refiloe Matji, the National TB Control Programme Manager said that it is tragic that South Africa remains one of the 22 high TB burden countries, although free TB testing is available at public clinics countrywide to anyone with TB symptoms – the main being a cough for longer than two weeks. Those who test positive are prescribed free treatment.

Dr Matji said: “We recognise that the long treatment presents a challenge for patients – especially those in the lower income groups who are also frequently malnourished. Absence of proper nutrition makes it even more difficult to complete treatment. So, the Programme’s strategy to increase access to testing and treatment is working in sync with the government’s poverty alleviation and food security programmes.”

Later in the day, speaking at the national TB Day function, which was held at the Centenary Hall in New Brighton, the Minister said: “Reaching the stated goals is dependent on a consistent flow of information and unwavering action. That is why all of us here and across the country are a part of the STOP TB – BECAUSE YOU CAN campaign. Every additional person informed is hopefully one person less who may needlessly die because of tuberculosis.”

To launch the campaign, a pledge, appealing to all South Africans for assistance to STOP TB, was signed by dignitaries and TB patients. As a symbol of personal commitment, the pledge will journey from the Eastern Cape around the country as the campaign is rolled out province by province. It is hoped that the pledge will be signed by the majority of South Africans, and asks them to:

- go for an examination if they cough for longer than two weeks;
- advise anyone who coughs for more than two weeks to go for an examination;
- complete their treatment if diagnosed with TB;
- assist TB patients in taking their treatment; and
- ensure that their actions do not stigmatise TB patients.



The Minister also said that the government was committed to increasing its financial resources in the fight to STOP TB. This commitment was echoed globally, when the government's proposed TB/HIV initiative was approved by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. More than R8 million will be made available over a period of two years to address the problem of HIV/TB co-infection.

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