



health

Department:
Health
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MEDIA STATEMENT

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Health Minister announces Diphtheria Outbreak disease in the Western Cape

Pretoria: Minister of Health, Dr Joe Phaahla would like to announce the outbreak of Diphtheria disease at the Pollsmoor Correctional Centre in the Western Cape Province. A 19 year-old male inmate presented with Diphtheria symptoms on the 28th October 2023 and was referred to the local hospital for further medical care.

Throat swabs were collected the same day for culture laboratory testing and the results came back positive five days later (2 November). Unfortunately, his health condition continued to deteriorate until he regrettably passed away on the 5th November 2023.

The public health measures were undertaken to put the outbreak under control, and these include contact tracing of inmates, correctional services staff, consulting healthcare workers and emergency services personnel. More tests were conducted with the 55 identified close contacts as part of case investigation and the results of 8 inmates tested positive for diphtheria, two of them presenting with mild symptoms and the other six are asymptomatic. All patients including the deceased fall within the age group of 18 to 23 years old.

Immediate contacts of the patients and the deceased have been put in isolation from the rest of the correctional centre section to prevent further spread of the disease. Two staff members displayed symptoms compatible with diphtheria and have received treatment whilst waiting for their laboratory test results.

The Western Cape Department of Health Disease Outbreak Team working together with the Department of Correctional Services, have embarked on a vaccination campaign in the affected section of the correctional centre.

Two laboratory-confirmed cases of diphtheria disease were recorded earlier in the year from an adult in KwaZulu-Natal and a child in the Western Cape.

Diphtheria is an uncommon, but vaccine preventable serious infection caused by a toxin producing bacterium called *Corynebacterium diphtheria*. The toxin may lead to difficulty in breathing, heart rhythm problems, and even death. The bacteria spreads from person to person, usually through respiratory droplets from coughing or sneezing.

The symptoms of diphtheria include sore throat (with the formation of a membrane on the tonsil and throat), and swollen glands in the front of the neck. Close contacts of known cases are at increased risk of infection. Routine diphtheria vaccination is part of the childhood vaccine programme and parents are encouraged to get their children vaccinated. Health care workers are urged to maintain a high index of suspicion in order to ensure that cases are detected early, whilst all individuals are reminded of the importance of ensuring that they and their families are up-to-date with their vaccinations.

In South Africa, diphtheria-containing vaccine is offered to all children free of charge in public sector facilities at 6, 10 and 14 weeks and 18 months (as one component of the hexavalent vaccine). Booster doses are offered at 6 and 12 years, and to all Grade 5 learners in public schools during the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) PV vaccination campaign.

For all technical enquiries, please contact the National Institute for Communicable Diseases at Media@nicd.ac.za

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