



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MEDIA STATEMENT

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SA makes progress with HPV vaccination to prevent cervical cancer

Pretoria: As the country joins the global community today to mark four years of global movement known as Cervical Cancer Elimination Day of Action aimed at eliminating cervical cancer as a public health challenge, the Department of Health is confident that the country is making a positive progress with efforts to prevent cervical cancer through various interventions, including expanded screening and testing services.

The country has one of the highest rates of cervical cancer among women and faces a significant burden, with an estimated 13,800 new cases annually. According to the World Health Organization, Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women globally with around 660 000 new cases and around 350 000 deaths in 2022. In South Africa, cervical cancer is the second most common cause of cancer in women. Though, cervical cancer can be cured if diagnosed at an early stage and treated promptly.

This Cervical Cancer Elimination Day of Action campaign is commemorated annually on 17 November since the year when 194 countries including South Africa resolved in 2020 to eliminate a cancer for the first time and later WHO launched the Global strategy to eliminate cervical cancer.

The government has introduced a number of interventions to prevent cervical cancer amongst women, and these include the launch of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination campaign in 2014 to reduce the incidence of cancer of the cervix mainly targeting all girls in grade 5, aged 9 years and older in all public and special schools. So far, between 85% and 89% of targeted girls received one or more doses. Studies have shown that vaccination in late childhood/early adolescents is effective as strong immunity develops (before onset of sexual activity).

Over this period more than 7,1 million doses have been administered, and more than 4 million girl learners protected. It is estimated that approximately 85% of girls 9 – 15 years in public schools and approximately 75% of all girls 9 – 15 years in South Africa have been vaccinated and are protected from developing cervical cancer. The programme has since been extended to private schools effective from this year in order to ensure no girl child is left behind, with or without medical aid.

The success of the HPV vaccination programme in South Africa has been attributed to high level political commitment by Ministries of Health and Basic Education including Civil Society, Parents and School Governing Bodies, dedicated funding from the National Treasury.

This year's commemoration is focusing is on healthcare workers for commitment in the fight against cervical cancer which is encapsulated in the theme: "***Elevating Frontline Health Workers: Transforming Global Commitments into Lifesaving Actions***". It underscores the critical role that healthcare professionals play in enhancing awareness, screening, and treatment of cervical cancer.

Healthcare workers (HCWs) are pivotal in implementing cervical cancer screening programs and educating communities about prevention. Their knowledge and attitudes significantly influence screening uptake among women. Studies have shown that inadequate knowledge and misconceptions among HCWs can lead to suboptimal care for cervical cancer patients, highlighting the necessity for continuous education and training.

It is for this reason that the Department of Health in collaboration with World Health Organization, is rolling out capacity training for clinicians in provinces to improve their confidence in performing cervical cancer screening, diagnosis and treatment procedures. A total number of 405 299 girl learners (88.6% of the target population) received HPV vaccination during February/March 2024 round of HPV vaccination against cervical cancer. To date, 17 of the country's 52 health districts have begun using HPV testing with more districts expected to start during the current financial year.

While the country is making progress with HPV vaccination, cervical screening and treatment are lagging behind. Thus, parents and care givers are reminded to ensure that all eligible girls who missed HPV dose, should get catch-up doses offered in primary health facilities free of charge.

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