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MEDIA STATEMENT

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Department of Health welcomes Jehovah's Witnesses' change of heart on blood transfusions

Pretoria: The Department of Health welcomes the historic and significant decision by Jehovah's Witnesses to change their longstanding position on blood transfusions.

For decades, the religious prohibition on blood transfusion posed a major challenge to the healthcare system, specifically in emergency and critical care settings. Blood transfusion is a life-saving intervention that directly addresses life-threatening deficits in oxygen delivery and haemostasis (the stopping of bleeding), and enables complex medical procedures that would otherwise be unsafe.

This has saved many millions of lives throughout history, hence its prohibition had left doctors frustrated when somebody they could have saved with a simple blood transfusion passes under their watch. The prohibition of blood transfusion on religious ground had been a thorn in the flesh of the healthcare system for many decades.

"We note that Jehova's Witness still prohibit transfusion of whole blood, but we wish to reassure the nation that this prohibition is not of significance to the healthcare system. This is because Doctors and hospitals or any other health facility has for decades discouraged the use of whole blood for ordinary transfusions", says the Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi.

Whole blood is extremely unaffordable and, in many cases, not needed. There are very few circumstances under which whole blood need to be transfused.

Minister Motsoaledi commended Jehovah's Witnesses for this "giant leap", noting that the decision lifts a substantial burden from the shoulders of healthcare workers, many of whom had to resort to the courts in order to save innocent children from the beliefs of their parents.

A blood transfusion is a medical procedure in which donated blood or specific blood components are given to a patient through a vein to replace lost blood or to treat several conditions that affect how well blood functions.

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