
TO: ALL MEDIA
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MEDIA ADVISORY: KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH TO IMMUNISE AROUND 2 MILLION CHILDREN IN TWO WEEKS

In the coming weeks, from the 22 February to 7 March 2010, the MEC for Health in KwaZulu-Natal will unveil a plan to immunize children between the ages 6months and 15years against measles to curb the spread of the disease in the province.

Last year, initial cases of measles were first detected in Umgungundlovu District (Hilton College) around September. More cases were seen in other districts around October 2009. What has been clear is that the spread of the disease in the districts can be traced back to the first case that was seen in that particular district. The disease progression in various districts was as follows; Amajuba started with 10 cases in October, then increased to 25 (November) and 75 in December; in Umgungundlovu there were 7 cases in September, 8 in October and November and 40 in December; in Uthukela there were 14 in October, 21 in November, and 32 in December; in Zululand there were 17 in November and 30 in December-30. Lastly in eThekweni there were 12 cases in October, 13 in November and 30 in December all spread across the district. At this stage; KwaZulu-Natal has **429** cases confirmed measles cases as of 30 December 2009.

In view of the rising cases and the number of communities involved, in February, the Department will start a thorough-going mass immunization campaign targeting all children between the ages of 6months to 15years against measles and polio. The second round will be from 12th to 25th April. The aim is to immunize close to 3 million children. District outbreak response teams are already in place to educate and immunize children.

"To be effective, the campaign must reach $\geq 90\%$ coverage within this short period. Special focus will be on high risk and hard to reach areas as well as the zero dose children; those children who have not been immunised. We want to ensure that populations most likely to be affected by measles such as underserved and malnourished children are reached. All attempts to reach the unreachable and high risk populations we will work with local leaders, religious leaders, councilors and community based organizations" says the **MEC for Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo**.

Measles is a highly contagious, serious disease caused by a virus. The first sign of measles is usually a high fever, which begins about 10 to 12 days after exposure to the virus, and lasts four to seven days. A runny nose, a cough, red and watery eyes, and small white spots inside the cheeks can develop in the initial stage. After several days, a rash erupts, usually on the face and upper neck. At about three days, the rash spreads, eventually reaching the hands and feet. The rash lasts for five to six days, and then fades. On average, the rash occurs 14 days after exposure to the virus (within a range of seven to 18 days).

Severe measles is more likely among poorly nourished young children, especially those with insufficient vitamin A, or whose immune systems have been weakened by HIV and AIDS or other diseases. Routine measles vaccinations for children combined with mass immunization campaigns are key public health strategies to reduce measles outbreaks.

The Department is making a passionate plea to the community to make that **all** children between the ages of 6 months and 15 years are brought through to the clinic or hospital during the April to May irrespective of their social standing and/or immunization history. The cause of the current outbreak is unknown, and therefore every child in these age groups is considered at risk.

Ends

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