

Media Release

TO: ALL MEDIA
DATE: 19 MARCH 2010
EMBARGO: NONE

MARCH 21, WORLD DOWN SYNDROME AWARENESS DAY: STOP EXCLUSION AND DARE TO CARE

On the 21st March the people and government will commemorate the Human Rights day as well as the WORLD DOWN SYNDROME AWARENESS DAY. The 21st MARCH was identified as a result of its significance of the date 21/3. People with Down syndrome have an extra chromosome (3 instead of 2) on the 21st pair.

Now known as trisomy-21 because of the third copy of the 21st chromosome, Down syndrome was first described by an English doctor, Dr. John Langdon Down in 1866 but until Professor Lejeunes publication in 1959, the ultimate cause of Down syndrome was unknown.

The focus on Down Syndrome is in recognition of the burden that mental, brain and genetic disorders pose on people and families affected by them, and with the aim to highlight the important advances made by researchers and clinicians in reducing suffering and the accompanying disability. Our message is one of concern and hope.

"During this time; the health sector around the world pays tribute to the pioneering work of Professor Lejeune and celebrate the tremendous advances in the care and social welfare of people with Down Syndrome over the years. Those of us in the health profession continue to draw strength and hope from the pioneers' optimism and their simple and profound dedication to humanity. It is emotive when such capable people (people with Down syndrome) are not accorded a fair chance in society as full members of families and communities. Think of them as people first. I therefore call on families and communities to stop exclusion and dare to care!" says the MEC for Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo.

The road ahead is long. It is littered with myths, secrecy and shame. Rare is the family that will be free from an encounter with such a disorder or will not need assistance and care over a difficult period. Yet, we feign ignorance or actively ignore this fact.

Doctors have a number of ways to identify high-risk pregnancies. They measure the mother's blood levels of certain proteins and hormones. And they use ultrasound to scan so-called nuchal translucency – the thickness of a layer of fluid that forms near the neck of a developing fetus. Too much liquid there is often a sign of Down Syndrome. We urge expecting mothers to speak to their health care professional about their pregnancy and risk of Down Syndrome.

Together we can do better, let us stop exclusion and dare to care!
ENDS!

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH: KWAZULU-NATAL
CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS