

## **MEC Strengthens ties with faith based leaders in rolling out medical male circumcision and eliminating maternal illnesses and deaths**

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Today; the KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, held a meeting with faith leaders to strengthen long held ties in the fight against HIV and AIDS; and eliminate maternal and neonatal illnesses as well as to forge partnerships in the rollout of the medical male circumcision.

The department has a long history of partnership with religious leaders in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Through trainings, religious leaders share experiences and carry their message to communities and they are a powerful force in the lives of most people. The integral role religion plays in people's daily lives places religious leaders in a position of tremendous trust and influence. Social and religious history around male circumcision places religious leaders to be able to influence their fellow worshippers in a strategic role to promoting medical male circumcision.

"Following the pronouncement by His Majesty, we engaged in a consultation process which included health care professionals and traditional leaders. As a strategic partner, we have come to meet faith leaders to enlist them as we scale up our maternal and neonatal health, medical male circumcision and HCT campaigns. They have advised us that a proper understanding and implementation of religion, from the standpoint of both knowledge and worship, can only be arrived at through physical health and life preservation" says the MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo.

The meeting was largely attended by representatives of different faith communities who met the MEC to engage on the fight against HIV and AIDS. The meeting discussed and agreed on the following;

- (i) Promoting Safe Pregnancy and Motherhood: build a partnership and collaboration in achieving universal coverage of ante-natal care for all women and newborns. There was also an expressed commitment to discouraging teenage pregnancies as these pose a life risk for the mother and/or the baby. Faith leaders to promote a message of delayed sexual debut ;
- (ii) Every pregnancy must be wanted: This message will be part of the societal role in fighting maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality. The faith leaders, together with the department, cherish a vision to significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the high toll of maternal and neonatal illnesses and death. The department's chosen path is to realize this vision as a comprehensive societal initiative that responds to women's needs from a rights-based approach.
- (iii) Medical Male Circumcision and HIV Counseling and Testing Campaigns: expressed support for medical male circumcision as well as the HIV Counseling and Testing (HCT) Campaigns. They will be promoting these in their places of worship. On the HCT Campaign they further availed their places of worship as non-medical HIV Counseling and Testing sites.

Ends

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