

TO: ALL MEDIA
DATE: 31 MARCH 2012
EMBARGO: IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Global TB Ambassador brings TB awareness to Taxi Ranks

The Global TB Ambassador and Television presenter Ms Gerry Elsdon brought a clear TB message to taxi commuters and drivers that unless everybody plays their role in stopping the spread of TB and ensuring that those infected get and complete their treatment regimen, TB will remain another pandemic despite the fact that it can be cured cheaply.

“I don’t think we should be shy about knocking on people’s doors,” she says. Elsdon, who conceded that she has no idea what she will find on her sojourn. “I want to use the transport used by patients and carers. It’s a great way to engage with them,”

Ms Elsdon, who is also an International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Society Global TB Ambassador, started a two-week walking campaign called the ‘Hit the Road and Kick TB Walk for Humanity’. She aimed to reach no fewer than 3-million South Africans from all walks of life, who are either in need of treatment or testing for the disease. To do this, she visited the homes of patients, schools, TB hospitals and clinics, mines, prisons, schools, taxi ranks, and other areas and facilities with a high prevalence of TB.

Ms Elsdon arrived in KwaZulu-Natal on the 30th March and visited uMgungundlovu Pietermaritzburg Taxi ranks followed by the visit to Pinetown taxi rank today. Ethekekwini and uMgungundlovu are two districts where the TB was once declared to be at crisis point. The two districts have HIV prevalence rates of over 40%.

KwaZulu-Natal has had the highest number of TB cases of all provinces for a number of years and in 2010 this stood at 120 421 cases of which 27 913 were new smear positive. The province, however, continued to show steady improvement in the management of TB and the TB cure rate improved dramatically from 34.8% in 2004 to 66.3% in 2009 and is now approaching the 2009 national average of 71.1%.

Five of the seven rural districts have incidence rates over 1 000 per 100 000, with four of these districts located in KwaZulu-Natal. Three metros have a high defaulter rates, namely, eThekwini, Nelson Mandela Bay Metro and the City of Tshwane and this is concerning given the high caseload especially in eThekwini. Retention of patients on treatment is essential for reducing the transmission of TB and to limit the development of drug-resistant TB.

Four districts, two in KwaZulu-Natal and two in the Eastern Cape have cure rates of less than 60% and for the last three years have failed to improve their performance substantially: Umkhanyakude (46.9%), Amatole (52.5%), eThekwini (55.9%) and Alfred Nzo (56%). But the story is not that gloomy; six districts between 2010 and 2011 have achieved a cure rate of over 80% and a further two districts, iLembe and Uthungulu, have shown considerable improvement achieving cure rates just below 80%.

Ms Elsdon’s says; ““We are our brother’s keepers – in other words, we are all responsible for each other.” Her walking campaign kicked off on today, 23 March, when she, Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, South African Red Cross Society President Nqe Dlamini, fellow TB Ambassador Theo Kgosinkwe, poet and TB survivor Lebo Mashile and other celebrities, supported by the National Department of Health and the USAID TB Project, marched from the SABC studios in Auckland Park to Johannesburg’s Park Station.

She concluded by saying that despite efforts and the work of many individuals and partners the humbling fact remains: TB, one of the three major infectious killers and is still an almost ‘invisible’ disease.

She said; “I wish to challenge each one of us: To make the TB dialogue more accessible to a broader base of people so that we can achieve our goal of ZERO TB DISCRIMINATION; to inspire outrage over the devastation caused by TB and work tirelessly towards ZERO NEW TB INFECTIONS; to create tangible, understandable, motivating objectives that are targeted to priority audiences and ensure that there are ZERO TB RELATED DEATHS; and to develop breakthrough interventions that moves us closer to ELIMINATING TB IN OUR LIFETIME.”

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