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**KZN health HOD, Dr Sifiso Mtshali, calls for a change of health attitudes to curb the spread of tuberculosis**

THE time has come for men to stop boasting among their peers that they have not seen a doctor in many years, because this puts pressure on them to maintain this record – even when they are sick.

Instead, society in general will be better off and free of diseases such as Tuberculosis - if people get a regular health examination, adhere to proper ventilation, engage in physical exercise and stop smoking and drinking alcohol, among other things.

This is the view of KwaZulu-Natal Health Head of Department (HoD), Dr Sifiso Mtshali, who delivered a speech to commemorate World TB Day in Illembe District, at KwaDukuza (Stanger) today (26 April 2016).

KwaZulu-Natal has the highest prevalence of TB, followed by Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Western Cape.

The World Health Organisation advocates that children under the age of 15 should account for 15 to 20 % of all TB cases detected.

Citing a lack of public awareness as one of the reasons behind the spread of TB, Dr Mtshali said:

“This deadly yet totally curable disease is spread from person to person through the air. When people with lung TB cough, sneeze or spit, they propel the TB germs into the air. A person needs to inhale only a few of these germs to become infected.”

The HoD expressed concern that, due to a variety of reasons, too many people with TB were still presenting at health facilities too late.

“We thus thought it wise to utilize this occasion to again enlighten our community members on TB symptoms and also encourage those who suspect that they might have it, to visit a health facility nearest to them.”

He said for those who had been diagnosed with TB, the importance of adherence to TB treatment could not be over-emphasised.

“TB can only be cured if you complete your treatment. It is extremely important to note that if you stop taking the medication, the bacteria become stronger and immune to the medication. It takes a full six months to clear the lungs of the TB bacteria.

He made an impassioned plea to men to adopt a health-seeking behavior.

“The reality is that, generally, men like to boast among themselves that they never go to the doctor. They then try their best not to break this record, even when they are sick. And they tend to rely on their wives and girlfriends to undergo tests for HIV and TB ‘on their behalf’. You find someone suddenly holding a braai because his wife tested negative for HIV. That does not help because it is common for couples to be sero-discordant (One partner HIV positive, the other negative). The best approach is for each and every individual to take charge of their own health, by undergoing regular health screening, at least once a year.”

Dr Mtshali said HIV and TB form a lethal combination, each speeding the other's progress, and

KwaZulu-Natal has more a than 60% HIV and TB co-infection rate.

“Someone who is infected with HIV is much more likely to become sick with TB. Today we want everyone to be aware that there is medication for people who are HIV positive to take, to prevent them getting TB. The treatment is called INH Prophylaxis treatment (IPT). We are thus able to completely treat TB, on people who are HIV positive as well.”

“Sometimes people default on treatment many times and they develop Drug Resistant TB. This form of TB is much harder to cure; the treatment can take from 2 to 3 years with painful daily injections. I want you all to know that TB is 100% curable and TB testing and treatment is free at any government clinic or hospital.”

Dr Mtshali said today’s campaign in ILembe stems from the fact that this district is among those with the highest incidence of TB in the Province, including UGu, UThungulu and EThekwini.

However, he said the Department was well geared to deal with the TB problem in ILembe District, as it has:

- 33 Primary Health Care clinics;
- 2 Community Health Centers;
- 3 District Hospitals;
- 1 Regional Hospital, as well as, and
- 174 Community Care Givers.

Dr Mtshali also called on society to fully support the Department’s “Tackling TB in Schools” campaign, which aims to:

- Increase knowledge about TB, especially prevention.
- Increase TB case finding by screening and testing for TB.
- Make sure all learners with TB are linked to care, and also;
- Improve treatment adherence.

“We believe that our focus in Schools will greatly empower the children to protect themselves from contracting TB; will also teach them ways to prevent the spread of TB and most importantly, help in destigmatising TB and HIV.”

He said the best way to prevent getting TB is to keep the body healthy and strong by:

- Eating nutritious food, junk food might taste nice but it doesn’t provide your body with the nutrients it needs.
- Drinking plenty of fresh clean water.
- Exercising.
- Stopping smoking and limiting alcohol intake
- Practicing safe sex, knowing your status.
- Getting plenty of sleep
- Practicing good hygiene, washing hands before preparing food and after going to the toilet and changing babies’ nappies.
- Having regular health check up’s like blood pressure and blood glucose.

Earlier in the day, Dr Mtshali led an Anti-Illegal Abortion campaign through the streets of KwaDukuza (Stanger) Central Business District. After personally removing posters promoting illegal abortions,

Dr Mtshali handed over a memorandum to representatives of the SAPS, National Prosecuting Authority and ILembe District Municipality calling for their co-operation in fighting the scourge.

Photos by Themba Mngomezulu/KZN Department of Health

ENDS

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