

Speech delivered by Dr Zweli Mkhize at the National Cemeteries and Crematoria Conference in Durban on July 15 2004.

The different aspects and implications of death in society are not a popular topic. The reality that faces all society is that death is a real and inseparable part of life. Despite this reality, death remains unacceptable in most situations, and thus mankind tends to shy away from dealing directly and honestly with death, especially when it affects close loved ones.

A survey was done on the data obtained from Department of home affairs records, representative of 12% of the deaths as provided by Stats SA. The survey analysed causes of death in our country. It found that communicable diseases caused 43% of deaths, 44% were caused by chronic degenerative diseases and 13% are caused by injuries. For purposes of health planning, these broad categories can be further analysed to specific diseases. Many of these deaths are preventable through various means yet they persist.

It is a reality that the major contributory factor in the increasing of the current trends and number of deaths today is HIV/ AIDS which often is associated with tuberculosis and other significant opportunistic infections. Often the patients afflicted with AIDS die quietly in isolation after a long illness. This increase has resulted in major problems where burial space has been used up. Whenever I pass through the cemeteries I have always been struck by the observation that the recent graves are significantly more than the older graves. Although the statistic suggests a lower percentage of deaths due to injuries, in reality the deaths and injuries as a result of vehicle accidents and interpersonal violence still remain significantly high. These are all preventable.

The major challenge we have to deal with is the inaccuracy of available data on deaths. For various reasons, many bodies are disposed of without their deaths being formally registered, a factor which renders the most reliable source of our data, Stats SA vulnerable to receiving incomplete information. The recorded number of deaths between 1997 and 2001, was estimated at

410 000; and this figure was adjusted for the under-reporting, thus estimating the number of deaths to be 518 000 for the same period. Quite frequently this occurs when families wish to avoid the cost prolonged mourning before burials, which is associated with absence from work and the high cost of maintaining mourners.

The challenge of disposing of the remains of the deceased is immense. Many HIV positive patients are denied insurance cover and burial cover on account of their status. There are instances where the surviving relatives are charged to repay the funds used in the funeral when it discovered that the deceased was HIV positive. I believe that such funeral parlors or insurance companies need to be challenged in court and in public for inhumane policy. Those who are affected need to mount a campaign to expose these companies and inform the public so that we can all "vote with our feet".

Municipalities in several areas have expressed concern about the unavailability of burial space. This has raised the matter of alternatives to conventional burial rites, such as the idea cremation. Cremation has been rejected as being contradictory to African culture and traditions. It will take a considerably long time to convince the African community in large numbers to accept cremation because the African concept of death is transformation from one form to another. This concept sees human body as sacrosanct and thus discourages tampering with the body of the deceased. Cremation is considered an extreme form of tampering, although, there are small (probably insignificant) number of Africans who have overcome the psychological inhibitions in this regard.

Due to the rituals and traditional rites associated with gravesites, the recycling of graves will give many of our people difficulty, since the traditional association of the relatives with the burial site is life long, and some times takes a spiritual dimension. Municipalities must take into account that for the next decades the number of deaths will continue to increase, especially due to HIV and AIDS, and they must plan for acquisition of more land for burial purposes. This means long term planning.

The other matter that needs to be confronted is the high cost of dying. Many families lose a member and mount a very expensive funeral cost. The glitz and glamour of funerals is supposed to signify love and respect for the individual. Sometimes this arises from individuals who had not done so for the entire duration of the illness. This lavish display of fondness is performed when the subject of attention is in no state to appreciate it. In some cases an "after tears" party is held, where the somber mood of the funeral is replaced by the frenzy of a wild party quiet unknown in the recent past. In the past the neighbours and relatives who came to the bereaved contributed anything edible from their own homes shared the anguish of death. People came to mourn and not to sample a three-course meal, complete with large quantities of alcoholic drinks. The appetite and preference for the decorations and frills, which are a standard feature of funerals nowadays, is a troubling trend indeed. In the near future, very few people will be able to afford the cost of dying.

The government has offered a pauper burial service for communities who cannot afford the cost of burial. The increasing number of communities that cannot afford to bury their beloved ones is increasingly straining this service. We appeal for funeral parlors and undertakers to understand and manage this service with the sense of responsibility to protect the dignity of those they offer the service.

I wish to invite the religious leaders and the funeral parlors to work together in the effort to reduce the cost of funeral services and motivate communities to adopt more affordable packages. They must also play a role in health education and promotion to help reduce the inevitable overcrowding of weekend funerals. Education about alternatives to formal burials must begin in order for a new culture of burials to emerge.