

Speech by KZN Health MEC, Neliswa Nkonyeni on the occasion of the launch of the Mother and Child Health priorities Forum.

4 April 2008

All protocol observed

Our greatest gratitude goes to our Area General Manager, Dr Mandla Mhlongo, the Ethekwini District Office, eThekwini Municipality as well as the University of KwaZulu Natal for positively responding to our clarion call to pay special attention to the plight, well being and upward development of women and children of this province.

I must congratulate all of you for agreeing to be part of this Mother and Child Health Priorities Forum as you are clearly reminding everyone out there that the survival, welfare and upbringing of the children is not only limited in terms of responsibility, to the biological parents but to the nation as a whole.

The nobility of your cause is humbling as we are made to understand that the aim of this forum is 'to bridge the gap between the Department of Health and the community with the aim of improving child survival.' I also want to be part of this for as long as I live!

What you have proposed reminds us that the embers of Ubuntu ethos still burn bright in the eThekweni District; ladies and gentlemen, the whole of humankind is the victor in this.

Dear pioneers, our 2007 Budget Speech embraced and promoted the theme of 'investing in women and children secures a healthy nation' for a purpose. This, after we became aware that in 2005, worldwide, 9.7 million children under five, died mostly from preventable causes such as pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria and neonatal causes.

One of the worrying phenomena that point to the lack of appropriate information, awareness and education is that, approximately 70% of child deaths occur not in health facilities but in communities. This begs for answers in as far as, what needs to be done and by who.

We hope that the creation of this forum will go a long way in:

- Creating awareness to women about the Maternity Services available for them;
- Empowering the youth on issues of sexual abuse and reproductive health; and
- Sharing information on Nutrition for babies.

The information gleaned from the third report on confidential enquiries into maternal death (saving mothers report) show us that

we need to do things differently if we are to be relevant to the current situation.

What it actually says is that we have to accept that women, family and community need to be empowered, involved and made to participate actively in activities and programmes aimed at improving maternal and neonatal health as well as reproductive health in general.

I fully endorse Dr Mhlongo's intended outcomes for this forum and pledge full support as I agree that surely we do need a vehicle that will strive to:

1. Identify barriers to access to health care and how these can be bridged.
2. Identify challenges and gaps from the communities and come up with solutions
3. Create a forum which will meet on a regular basis to:
 - assess progress on implementation and challenges,
 - develop of solutions for meeting targets
 - facilitate open communication with communities
 - Promote accountability to communities in terms of Care Health services delivery
 - Identify research priorities.
4. Identify the best possible community mobilization strategies to communicate key child health messages.

The collaboration formed in pursuance of the above mentioned outcomes will surely take us a long way in the attainment of one of the health related Millennium Development Goals which aims at reducing the child mortality rate.

As members of the forum we want to assure you of our unwavering support. Our Department, for instance, last week launched the Dual therapy for Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV. For this we have already put plans in place for its implementation with clear objectives in mind as we seek to:

- Reduce prevalence of HIV among women of child bearing age.
- Minimize the risk of MTCT of HIV during labour and delivery.
- Reduce infant mortality due to HIV and AIDS
- Reduce the risk of post-natal transmission of HIV.

I must also point out that your initiative fits in hand in glove with our efforts to curb and stabilize the spread of unwarranted sexually transmitted diseases that eventually escalate to serious conditions that threaten women's reproductive capabilities. This, I mention because I hope you have plans to elicit the support of the menfolk for this effort.

Yes, we do see partnering with men in reproductive and sexual health as a systematic way to improve reproductive and sexual health outcomes through a gender-sensitive programmatic approach.

We are saying this forum must work to get men's active acceptance of—and support for—their female partners' needs, choices and rights in reproductive and sexual health.

Our men, especially at the earliest, must be made to support;

- gender equity,
- education for girls,
- safer sex practices, and
- the elimination of violence against women within their families, communities, and places of work.

In their homes, men must agree to negotiate reproductive decision-making, support their partners' choices and reproductive and sexual health needs, protect their partners and themselves against unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and HIV and AIDS, and share family responsibilities.

We need to strive for change of attitudes so that our boys can grow up respecting women and ultimately get into relationships based on equality and intimacy with their partners rather than sexual conquest.

Izingane zabafana sithi azifundiswe zisebancane ukuhlonipha abantu besifazane. Obaba sithi abadlale indima yabo kuloku babe isibonelo emakhaya ngokuthanda, bahloniphe, baphephise amakhosikazi abo.

It is a given that if we truly work together in these matters, we will succeed in promoting good health within our communities. Progress will be evident in the following areas:

- care for newborns and their mothers;
- infant and young child feeding;
- immunization;
- prevention and case management of childhood illnesses particularly diarrhoea, pneumonia and sepsis; and
- prevention and care of HIV and AIDS.

As a Department, we undertake to do everything in our power for you to succeed, as we have decided to extend the formation of these forums to all our Districts.

Again, we want to thank all the well intentioned individuals who are part of this ground breaking initiative that will undoubtedly impact on the inter-departmental and intersectoral collaboration.

Thank you again to all the:

- University representatives

- Health councilors
- Health representatives from community wards
- Representatives from the traditional healers organization
- Representatives of clinic committees
- Health care workers and management
- NGO's, FBO's and CBO involved with the care of children, and
- Community Health Workers' Facilitators

Your enthusiasm clearly shows that child survival is everybody's business.

I thank you.