

Speaking Notes by Deputy Minister of Health, Dr Joe on the Department's Response to tackle the burden of NCDs in South Africa during the Healthy Life Trajectories Initiative - SAMRC Pretoria

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Programme Director,
Vice President of the SA Medical Research Council Prof Liesl Zuhlke,
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Ms Shauna Flanagan, Counsellor and Head of Cooperation at High Commission of Canada in South Africa
Representatives from the Department of Health
Members and experts present here,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Good morning

It is my privilege to address you today on a matter of critical importance to the health and well-being of our nation: the burden of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) otherwise known as diseases of lifestyle because most of them linked to the manner in which people live their life. Of course, many of them are preventable and manageable conditions.

Non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory conditions, and cancers are among the leading causes of death in South Africa today. In particular, diabetes remained the second leading underlying cause of death in 2020 at 6.6% of all deaths, following Covid-19 which reached South Africa in 2020 and became the leading cause of death.

When looking at gender-specific causes of death, diabetes mellitus is the leading underlying cause of female deaths at 8.2% which increased from 7.7% in 2018. The rate at which diabetes is growing in our country is concerning.

Non-communicable diseases not only reduce life expectancy but also have a profound economic impact, straining both individuals and our healthcare system. It is crucial that we recognise the gravity of this burden which is deeply interconnected with factors such as unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, alcohol abuse, smoking and social and commercial determinants of health.

The Department of Health has prioritised addressing NCDs as a key component of our strategy. Our approach is both comprehensive and multifaceted, recognising that tackling these conditions requires sustained and collective efforts across the continuum of care, from prevention and early detection to enable effective treatment and management.

Our primary focus is on prevention. The Department has implemented public health campaigns aimed at promoting healthier lifestyles. Through education on healthy diets, regular physical activity, and avoiding harmful substances such as tobacco and alcohol, we are encouraging South Africans to make healthier choices, and it is important to emphasize that not all healthier choices have financial implications.

The collaboration with other government departments such as Department of Basic Education, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture and the Department of Social Development, non-government organisations, civil society and the private sector, seeks to amplify these efforts and reach every corner of our society.

The early detection of NCDs is key to effective management. The department has rolled out community-based screening campaigns through Community Health Workers (CHWs) and Traditional Health Practitioners (THPs) targeting the early detection of hypertension and diabetes. CHWs and THPs are trained and provided with equipment to conduct screening in household and refer to health facilities when needed.

This initiative is bridging the gap between health services and the communities most at risk, by making screening services accessible to all, especially those in underserved communities. We have already conducted campaigns in KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Free State provinces. We will conduct campaigns in four more provinces before the end of this financial year. We only conduct campaigns in one district per province, and we impress upon provinces to further roll them out to other districts in phases as resources allow.

Our focus is not limited to the detection of diseases but also includes education on risk factors and lifestyle modifications that can prevent the progression of these conditions. The Department has recently entered into a memorandum of understanding with ParkrunSA to encourage our communities to utilise existing Parkruns and extend the establishment of parkruns to townships and villages to encourage and create an environment for people to walk, jog or run on weekends. Parkrun is positive, welcoming and inclusive, there is no time limit and no one finishes last.

At the heart of our NCDs response is strengthening our primary health care services. PHC facilities across the country are being equipped to manage and monitor patients with chronic conditions effectively. The department is working to ensure that treatment for NCDs is both accessible and affordable.

We have made significant strides in ensuring the availability of essential medicines for NCDs in public health facilities. The supply chain for chronic medication has been strengthened, and we continue to prioritise the availability of life-saving treatments for diabetes, hypertension, other NCDs and communicable diseases. We are aware that we urgently need to review the Essential Medicine List as some new and more effective drugs are not yet included in the EML.

In addition, South Africa has led the way in regulatory interventions, such as the tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, The Minister of Health has published the following regulations to help reduce premature death from noncommunicable diseases:

1. Regulations relating to Trans-Fats in foodstuffs which prohibit the sale, manufacture and importation of oils and fats, including continuous phase emulsions, either alone or as part of processed foods. An increased intake of trans fat (>1% of total energy intake) is associated with increased risk of coronary heart disease mortality and events. South Africa is one of the global leaders in protecting the heart health of its citizens through the regulation of Trans fats.
2. Regulations relating to foodstuffs for infants and young children which aims to protect and promote optimal infant and young child feeding practices and to encourage the safe and appropriate use of commercially processed foods through regulating the labelling, advertising, sale and promotion, and the provision of information and education relating to infant and young child feeding and nutrition. The

benefits of early intervention continue to protect children into adulthood.

3. Regulations relating to the reduction of sodium in certain foodstuffs and related matters to help in reducing salt intake to less than 5g per day. Excessive salt intake is associated with hypertension which is the second leading cause of the death in South Africa and hypertension is a major risk factor for CVDs.

Scientific evidence suggests that reducing sodium intake significantly reduce blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular diseases in adults particularly its contribution towards coronary artery disease and stroke. South Africa is the first country in the world to legislate salt levels to help reduce the amount of salt in processed foods.

Last year, the Minister of Health published draft regulations to improve food labelling requirements so that consumers are clear about the contents of food. These regulations include:

- (i) a model to classify healthy foods
- (ii) specifying criteria for health claims, and,
- (iii) a mandatory Front of Pack Label in the form of an easily understood logos, to assist consumers in identifying foods that exceed the threshold of added sugar, sodium, and saturated fats as they contribute to the rising obesity and non-communicable disease and death burden in South Africa.

All these regulations are crucial in curbing the rise of NCDs. However, I must indicate that we are lacking in terms of monitoring and enforcing compliance to these regulations, and we are working on improving in this regard.

As we know, addressing NCDs cannot be the work of the health sector alone. The social and commercial determinants of health—such as poverty, education, and access to clean water and access to affordable nutritious food, increased availability of cheap non nutritious food, safe environments for physical activity—play a significant role in the development of NCDs.

Programme Director - For this reason, the Department of Health collaborates with the UN agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and other stakeholder to ensure that South Africa aligns with global best practices in NCD prevention and control as well as ensuring that the determinants of NCDs are tackled in a holistic manner.

We are making efforts to improve how we engage with stakeholders involved in the prevention and management of NCDs. Just last week, we placed an advert on newspapers inviting stakeholders to a meeting to discuss how best we should coordinate our work. We will be hosting a national cancer meeting on 16 – 17 October 2024 to discuss and agree on cancer coordination structures. The outcomes of these meetings will help us to provide support better especially funding. We need to take advantage of the Health Promotion Levy and use it to fund organisations involved in NCDs work.

I cannot conclude without mentioning research and innovation. To make informed decisions and improve outcomes, we must rely on data. Research and innovation are important to better understand the unique drivers of NCDs in South Africa, gaps in service delivery and opportunities for improvement.

I am looking forward to the presentations on new Healthy Life Trajectories Initiative (HeLTI) data results around the NCD burden, including multi-risk and multi-morbidity, young women's voices and preconception health and care. The findings of HeLTI are not simply to generate knowledge but to inform our national policies and decision-making.

The focus of HeLTI on gender-responsive interventions is valued because it ensures that the needs of men, women, boys, and girls, are addressed in a unique way while also considering the complex social, economic, commercial, behavioural and environmental factors that shape health outcomes.

Ladies and gentlemen, the battle against non-communicable diseases is far from over, but with the right interventions and a collective effort from all sectors of society, we can reduce the burden of NCDs on our country. Let us remember that the health of our nation is not only the responsibility of our government or healthcare professionals. It is a shared responsibility.

The Department of Health remains committed to strengthening prevention, improving access to care and treatment, to improve the health and well-being of our South Africans especially of children, our future generation. The fight against the NCDs requires all hands on deck, the govt cannot win this with the support and commitment of all sectors of the society.

The findings of Stats-SA survey that deaths due to major non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic lower respiratory diseases in South Africa increased over 20 years, should be a concern call for all of us.

I wish you all success in your robust discussions as you

Thank you.