

MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
Issued by: Department of Health
Date: Sunday, 20 October 2024

STATEMENT FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH REGARDING THE RECENT FOOD BASED ILLNESSES AND FATALITIES

Pretoria: In the past few weeks, South Africa has been bedevilled by a strange phenomenon of a spate of food-related sudden illnesses and deaths, especially in schools. Those affected have concluded that these ailments are a result of food poisoning emanating from food stuff, particularly snacks, sold by foreign owned spaza shops. This has become the generally held view in the country, which prompted some people to take action based on this belief and understanding.

These increasing incidents in black communities have led to an unfortunate and unsubstantiated perception that authorities are turning a blind eye to this crisis and seem not to care about what's happening to the citizens.

Contrary to these beliefs and perceptions this is what various authorities have been engaged in:

- SAPS detectives have been working around the clock to try unravel this mystery, especially where children have died as is the case in Naledi, Soweto.
- The metros of Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni have deployed their Environmental Inspectors investigating the cause of these sudden attacks.
- The Environmental Directorate of the National Department of Health has also sent their Health Inspectors to check compliance with health regulations.
- The Department of Agriculture has also sent in their officials to check if the problem might not be emanating their produce or from lack of compliance with some of their production regulations.
- The National Consumer Commission (NCC) has also deployed senior officials to investigate the possibility of a breach of consumer protection regulations.

After careful analysis of the situation, it is clear that these bodies were focused on their areas of work to check whether their laws and regulations and established practices had been breached or not complied with.

The national structure responsible for coordinating the security of the state (NATJOINTS), is treating these incidents as a potential threat to the security of the country and its citizens. Last week NATJOINTS met to analyse this situation and after careful analysis recommended that all these investigations involving various institutions and bodies should be coordinated by the Department of Health because in the final analysis whatever it is that is happening eventually leads to ill-health or even death.

This prompted the Minister of Health to convene the five institutions/bodies referred to above to a meeting. The Minister decided to bring a sixth institution, the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD). This is because a few years ago the country was bedevilled by a food-borne pathogen which doctors had diagnosed and laboratories identified as *Listeria Monocytogenes*. However, nobody knew what its source was. It is the NICD that mounted a country-wide search that led to the identification of the source. The Minister thought that experience would come handy in the situation the country is faced with today.

In this meeting of the 6 organs of state, each one of them reported extensively on what they had done and learnt and what their conclusions may be. It is common cause that outbreaks such as these may be caused by:

- A biological agent
- A chemical agent
- A physical agent

At the end of the careful analysis, the teams came to a conclusion that we are dealing with a chemical agent and that this must be identified as a matter of urgency.

A plan has subsequently been hatched to mount a systemic search for the agent causing this malady. On 17 October 2024 the first steps of implementing the plan was triggered and will be accelerated during the course of next week. Among others, this plan entails unleashing an army of 80 environmental inspectors (Health inspectors) from the National Department of Health and the City of Johannesburg. They will be joined by teams selected from SAPS, Agriculture and National Consumer Council. For the whole of last week, the teams were undergoing training at the NICD and have been provided with the necessary equipment and tools and will be working under the direct supervision of the NICD. On Monday, 21 October 2024 the teams will commence their work in Naledi, Soweto.

For more information and media enquiries, please contact:

Mr Foster Mohale
Health Departmental Spokesperson
0724323792
Foster.mohale@health.gov.za