

**STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF HEALTH REGARDING
RECENT FOOD-BASED ILLNESSES AND FATALITIES**

MONDAY, 28 OCTOBER 2024

My Colleague Minister of Police, Minister Senzo Mchunu

My Colleague Minister of Small Business Development, Ms
Stella Ndabeni-Abraham

National Commissioner of Police General Masemola

Officials from various institutions

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning.

BACKGROUND

The Department of Health issued a statement on the 20th October 2024 regarding recent food-based illnesses and fatalities. Subsequent to the Statement of 20 October, a press conference was held on Friday, 25 October 2024 at Birchwood Conference in which we indicated that the nation would receive an update on the matter on Monday, 28 October 2024.

It is now opportune to provide the nation with a progress report in respect of the cause of death of the 6 children in Naledi, Soweto.

To remind you, last week we dispersed a group of 80 Environmental Health Practitioners (Health Inspectors) who were joined by officials from other government departments whose line of work is relevant to the food-borne problem in Naledi. As said before they visited 84 Spaza shops in search of the evidence of a chemical which we had believed was responsible for the illnesses and fatalities that befell our nation, especially in Naledi, Soweto. That work was concluded on Thursday, 24 October 2024, with mop-up operations done on Friday, 25th October 2024. This operation was done under the supervision and instruction by experts from the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD).

On Saturday, 26th October 2024 the NICD brought together a team of highly experienced experts and specialists in various fields that are relevant to the present problem, that includes Forensic Pathologists, Toxicologists, Paediatricians and Epidemiologists. This team were given all the information including the medical files of the deceased children, and more importantly the post-mortem results. They used the World Health Organisation's (WHO) medical certification form recommended by the World Health Assembly (WHA), to do their analysis. As you may remember we had informed you that samples were taken during post-mortems and sent for toxicology analysis.

Ladies and gentlemen we are here today to inform you of the findings of our Toxicologists. The results show that the cause of death is unequivocally Organophosphate. As you know, Organophosphate is not one substance but a group of substances, which are usually used in Agriculture or as pesticides. The Organophosphate identified in this instance is called Terbufos. All the 6 children died of Terbufos ingestion.

In the past weeks several chemicals were bandied around as the possible causes of death. Some were even found in some retailers. In order to avoid confusion, I wish to mention each one of them and explain its significance. But before doing that I need to explain that apart from Organophosphate, another group of chemicals used as pesticides are called Carbamates. There is a slight difference between Carbamates and Organophosphates. One major difference is that Organophosphate is much more lethal and can cause irreversible damage.

Sometimes last week, there was a statement that indicated Carbamates was the cause of death. This was from postmortem observations, but the toxicology has proven that the actual cause of death is Organophosphate and not Carbamate.

On Friday, 25th October 2024 we had informed you that 4 people were arrested at the Johannesburg Mall because they were found trading in a chemical called Aldicarb. 1,450g of this chemical was confiscated.

What led to their arrest is that during the operations in Naledi some of the Spaza Shop owners confessed that those are the people who are selling them illegal chemicals. Aldicarb falls in the class of Carbamates and as stated, you can see that Aldicarb was not the cause of death in these cases, but it remains illegal to sell to the public because it is also a dangerous substance.

At the present moment, the samples that were taken via swaps in the various Spaza Shops in Soweto, have been sent to the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) and we are still waiting for the results. This means that while Organophosphate was found in the bodies of these children, we are still waiting to see if the same Organophosphate was found in the Spaza Shops, so up to so far we have not made that link. It is also important to mention that the Police did find the pocket of Chips in the pocket of one of the children. This was also sent for analysis and the results are out and were found to be negative.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS AND THE PRESENT SITUATION

When we mentioned that we are sending teams to search for the signs of the chemicals in these Spaza Shops, some people on social media were very skeptical because they said if the chemicals can affect the children, why would the Spaza Shop owners not be equally affected.

This is a very important point to explain: It is known medically that children are more susceptible to pesticide toxicity and other environmental toxicants than adults. This is due to several physiological factors:

- **Smaller body mass** – children have small body mass than adults, and therefore a given dose of pesticide can have a more severe impact on a child to this smaller body size;
- **Developing organs** – children's organs are still developing, making them more vulnerable effects of pesticides;
- **Behavioral patterns** – children's behaviour, such as hand-to-mouth and Usehand-to-object
- **Route of exposure** – children are affected by acute pesticide poisoning and chronic effect of exposure through ingestion, inhalation and dermal contact (WHO). That Organophosphate can even enter your body through contact with your skin, and hence can affect you from contaminated clothing. In children it has been reported that oral ingestion is the most common route for Organophosphate toxicity;

- **Treatment** – we wish to advise our medical personnel in hospitals and clinics as follows:
 - signs and symptoms of Organophosphate toxicity is severe diarrhea, vomiting, foaming at the mouth and nose, tears readily flowing from the eyes without anybody crying, and constant urination. Apart from supportive treatment well known by doctors and nurses, we wish to advise that the antidote of Organophosphate and Carbamate poisoning is Intra-venous atropine injection;
 - we also wish to advise that if faced with the possible Organophosphate poisoning, doctors also need to use AfriTox. This is an App designed by the poisoning centre, which will advise them step-by-step on what to do.

END.