

REMARKS BY EASTERN CAPE MEC FOR HEALTH, N Y CAPA AT THE BEST PRACTISE DISSEMINATION WORKSHOP ON 27 NOVEMBER 2024

Programme directors

Beyond Zero Board

Beyond Zero CEO, Dr Gaga

World Health Organisation, UNAIDS, SANAC Civil Society Forum representatives

National Department of Health's Dr Zungu

Eastern Cape Department of Health DDGs, Dr Xamlashe, Ms Nokwe and team health

The research fraternity

Beyond Zero's sub-recipients from all the 7 provinces

Global Fund primary recipients among us

Other primary recipients

Social partners

Activists

Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning

We are meeting here today as we are observing the **16 Days of Activism for no Violence Against Women and Children**. We must make it categorically clear that protecting women and children is not only a **16 days'** programme – but something that we should do **365 days** a year.

Real men do not abuse women and children. There can be no reason or justification for men to abuse women or children. I am challenging every man in this room to be at the forefront of the fight to end gender-based violence and femicide.

Equally important, in just a few days we, as the Eastern Cape, will host the national commemoration of World Aids Day at Sisa Dukashe Stadium in Mdantsane, under the theme: **"Equal Rights, Equal Care."** Just like today with this Best Practice Dissemination Workshop, there are also other build-up programmes leading to Sunday. All these programmes have been organised to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and same sex relationships.

We have come a long way as a country in the fight against HIV/ AIDS. For too long HIV/ AIDS was seen as a death sentence. Activists like the young and brave Nkosi Johnson played a huge role in demystifying the stigma about the virus. In his young years, Nkosi Johnson did more than most people will ever do.

Because of the great work that we have done as a country, HIV/AIDS is no longer seen as a death sentence. People see it for what it is – just another chronic illness. In fact, other illnesses like ischaemic heart diseases, COVID-19, stroke, diabetes mellitus, kidney diseases, and TB were among the top 10 causes of death the world over in 2021. This is according to the World Health Organisation.

While TB remains the number one killer in South Africa, fewer and fewer people are dying from HIV/AIDS. Before our government availed the life-saving antiretroviral treatment free of charge, many people lost their lives to the virus. Even when ARVs were made available, some people still defaulted and ended up succumbing to the virus.

Over the past **10 years**, our coordinated efforts have seen the province increasing the number of patients on ARV treatment from **320 062** in 2014, when the ARV initiation rate practice was ranging around **73%**, to where the progress is by mid-year of 2024, a total of **661 901** patients retained on ARV treatment. This increase is in line with the increase of ARV initiation rate that is ranging around **91%**. This growth demonstrates an increase of more than **100%** of patients that have been put on treatment over the past decade. This is **a story of good progress**.

These days, people with HIV are living longer, healthier and happy lives. People living with HIV are not the virus. They are on antiretroviral therapy pills while some people have limited the chances of being infected with HIV by taking the Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) pill. More and more people are openly living with HIV, including public figures. This assists in demystifying the stigma around HIV.

We have also embarked on mass testing for HIV. As such, between 2018/ 2019 financial year and 2023/ 2024 financial year, **10 876 555** HIV tests were done with **396 659** testing positive. We are happy that the positivity rate went from **5.1%** during 2018/ 2019 financial year to **2.1%** during the previous financial year.

While this shows that we are turning the corner, we want to get to a point where we will have zero new infections. This is especially so since we distributed **329 471 130** male condoms and **9 320 735** female condoms respectively since 2019/2020 financial year to the previous financial year. This shows that we have been consistent in distributing condoms.

A lot of work has been done but more still needs to be done before we can say we have won the war against this virus. This is a mammoth task since there are **7.8-million** people estimated to be living with HIV in SA, which is the highest in the world. But we are happy that new infections have been decreasing since the peak in 2008, but there's an alarming increase among young women which needs our urgent attention because these are the future leaders of this country.

This starts at our homes by openly talking to our children and grandchildren about dangers of unprotected sex. HIV infection is three times higher among young women and adolescent girls, but we cannot only educate girls and leave out boys because they are not infecting themselves.

It cannot be a taboo thing to talk about sex with girls aged 10 years when statistics have shown they are already sexually active and are getting pregnant at an alarming rate. It cannot be correct that **4.4-million** of the **19.1-million** adolescent girls and young women living with HIV in the world in 2022, were in South Africa. That was a staggering **23%** of the global average.

The high rate of teenage pregnancy, particularly the 10-14 years' cohort which accounts for **3%** of adolescent and teenage pregnancy, is a big threat and if not brought under control, we might not win the fight to stop the spread of HIV. Having so many young girls falling pregnant shows that our children are having unprotected sex. This exposes them to sexually transmitted illnesses like HIV.

We will not stop educating girls and boys about the dangers of unprotected sex. The department has also established **513** youth zones across the province where the youth go to get services in designated areas for them. While we want sexually active people to use condoms, we also promote the use of age-appropriate contraceptives. We are grateful to Beyond Zero for its comprehensive prevention programmes for adolescent girls and young women in and out of school in Nyandeni and Nelson Mandela Bay sub-district C, respectively

Programme director, we are proud at being the first province to launch the Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) campaign in the country. As you are aware, the U=U campaign encourages adherence to treatment so that an HIV positive patient who is virally suppressed does not transmit HIV to an HIV negative partner and will also not infect a child during delivery and breast feeding.

Another important programme is pre-exposure prophylaxis, which is the taking of ante retroviral treatment by an HIV negative partner to protect themselves from a positive partner. These partners are still advised to use a condom. HIV positive people are in loving relationships with HIV negative people and have had children together because of the great strides that we have made in the fight against HIV.

Ladies and gentlemen, we would be lying if we were to say all the great work that has been done was done by government alone. The truth of the matter is that without our partners like Beyond Zero, we would not have achieved half of what we have.

As one of the social partners providing services to key and priority populations (sex workers, men-who-have-sex-with-men, transgender adolescent and young people), Beyond Zero has greatly contributed towards destigmatising HIV and improved access to HIV prevention programmes. Thank you for being an Eastern Cape public health collaborator for over **20 years**.

Together, we have achieved better health outcomes for our people. The work that Beyond Zero and other partners have done in ending the stigma associated with

HIV/ AIDS is exactly what Elizabeth Taylor had in mind when she said: **“It is bad enough that people are dying of AIDS, but no one should die of ignorance.”**

We appreciate all the multiple developmental partners who have walked this road with us. The value derived by the public health system from these partners and their commitment to strengthening community health systems, cannot be compared to anything. It is invaluable.

Programme director, our country has prioritised key and at risk population to focus on in implementing the HIV prevention initiatives. One of these population segments is children. The department has been in the forefront implementation of transmission of HIV from an HIV positive mother to an unborn child through the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT). The PMTCT programme has gone various reviews and re-planning to enhance its effectiveness.

Key interventions to this effect, include, strengthening early booking of pregnant mothers for antenatal care, making HIV testing of all pregnant women a routine practice and ensuring that **95%** of HIV positive mothers are put on treatment. The performance of the province on ART initiation for pregnant mothers grew from **73%** in 2014 to **98.7%** by mid-year of 2024.

This improvement is coupled by the simultaneous improvement in the early booking from **43%** in 2014 to **65%** to mid-year of 2024. This performance resulted to a reduction of mother to child HIV transmission, which dropped from an average of **2%** in 2014 to **0.6%** by 2024.

As many countries have adopted the **95-95-95** targets, this means that treatment should be prioritised in resource allocation. Our government prioritised the resourcing of the interventions, through a Conditional Grant funding model. This funding is target-based to cover various sub-programmes and has been proportionally over the years. In 2014 the grant allocation for the province was at **R1,449,237-billion** and by 2024 the allocation is **R3,007,003-billion**.

We are also happy to announce that by July 2024, we had achieving **94-78-92** of the **95-95-95** targets, for the total population serviced through the public and private sector. Results for each of the sub-populations vary, with adult females at **95-81-93**, adult males at **93-72-93** and children older than 15 years at **88-82-70**. To achieve the second 95 target by 2028, the Eastern Cape must increase the number of total clients on ART by **148,314** to reach the **809 116** target. This is doable.

Working together, we will win this fight against HIV/ AIDS. We agree with Bobby Knight when he once said: **“The key is not the will to win . . . everybody has that. It is the will to prepare to win that is important.”** I can without any fear of contradiction state that, together with our partners, we do have the will to prepare to win this fight. And we will win it.

In conclusion, as we are heading into the busy festive season, we are calling on motorists to not drink and drive, rest after every **3 hours** and observe all the rules of the road so that we won't have many car accidents and fatalities. Trauma cases are adding more pressure on the already strained healthcare in our province, so we urge

everyone to be responsible on the road. However, our EMS crews, nurses and doctors will be ready for any eventuality.

We have also seen a surge in foodborne illnesses in recent months. Here in the province, from January to date, the Eastern Cape Department of Health reported **32** public health events related to foodborne diseases, resulting in **784** cases. Sadly, **7** people died. May their souls rest in peace.

Municipalities have embarked on food inspection blitzes to ensure that expired food items are removed from shelves. Spaza shops have been given **21 days** to register or else they will be closed. Our government is doing this to protect our children because it cannot be business as usual when our children are dying from eating snacks bought at spaza shops.

I wish you all fruitful, engaging, robust and frank discussions as we work together to prevent new HIV infections. Let us come up with more ways of stopping the spread of HIV.

I thank you.