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HEALTH

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SBRI together with EC Health Launch TB Clinical Research Trials

By Sinalo Dyalvan

The Synergy Biomed Research Institute (SBRI), in collaboration with the Eastern Cape Department of Health officially launched its Tuberculosis (TB) Clinical Research Studies at the Buffalo City Metro Health District (BCMHD) on 7 October 2026. The stakeholder engagement provided a platform for clinicians, health district management, research institutions and other stakeholders to discuss clinical trials being conducted in the district and their role in strengthening TB prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care.

ECDOH Chief Director for Strategic and Organisational Performance Professor Singilizwe Moko said "Clinical trials are the cornerstone of medical advancement. They provide the evidence required to determine whether new medicines, vaccines, diagnostic tests, and treatment approaches are safe, effective, and suitable for use in populations. Without clinical trials, we would not have made the remarkable progress witnessed in the management of diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, diabetes, hypertension, and most recently, COVID-19. In the Eastern Cape and specifically within Buffalo City Health District, research must continue to be aligned with the health needs of our people, especially the quadruple burden of disease. The Department of Health therefore priorities research that addresses the major burden of disease, strengthens health systems, improves service delivery, and contributes to equitable access to quality healthcare. Research institutions such as SBRI play an important role in helping us discover more effective diagnostic tools, shorter treatment regimens, improved adherence strategies, and innovative prevention approaches."

The Deputy Director of the Pharmaceutical Directorate presented the district's TB priorities "The TB performance data for the BCMHD highlights both the progress made and the challenges that require continued attention. While the district has recorded an increase in the number of people tested for tuberculosis using TB-NAAT, the figures also point to persistent challenges, particularly around treatment success and the loss of patients to follow-up. The data shows that the East London sub-area has a particularly high loss-to-follow-up rate of 18.8%, compared with 10.6% in Bisho and 8.3% in Mdantsane. These findings emphasise the need to strengthen patient follow-up, improve adherence to treatment and ensure that people diagnosed with TB remain in care until they complete their treatment. We must continue working together to close these gaps and improve TB outcomes across the district.'

Dr Mookho Malahleha, Principal Investigator and CEO of SBRI, highlighted the institute's multidisciplinary approach to clinical research and its commitment to strengthening research capacity in the Eastern Cape. She explained the four phases of clinical trials, which play an important role in assessing the safety and effectiveness of new medicines. Before clinical trials begin in humans, medicines undergo preclinical testing, which may include animal studies. Phase I trials are generally conducted with a small group of human participants to assess the medicine's safety and appropriate dosage. Phase II trials involve a larger group of participants to further evaluate their safety and effectiveness, while Phase III trials involve even larger groups where researchers also monitor side effects and compare the medicine with existing treatments. Once the medicine receives regulatory approval from and becomes available on the market, its safety and effectiveness continue to be monitored. Dr Malahleha also outlined SBRI's work across infectious and non-communicable diseases, highlighting the importance of collaboration with healthcare facilities, academic institutions, government departments and community advisory structures in advancing clinical research.

Dr Malahleha also highlighted a new study focusing on multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), which is exploring the possibility of reducing the duration of medication from six months to four months. The study reflects ongoing research efforts to identify shorter treatment options that could potentially reduce the burden of prolonged treatment on patients. If proven safe and effective, a shorter treatment regimen could offer significant benefits to patients and healthcare services. She encouraged healthcare practitioners and other stakeholders to engage with the SBRI team to gain a better understanding of clinical research and the processes involved in conducting trials. She emphasised the importance of strengthening research capacity and partnerships to ensure that clinical studies contribute to improved patient care and better health outcomes.

Figure 1: Health professionals, SBIR team and partners participating during the SBRI TB Research Clinical Trails

Figure 2: Mrs Sihiya Deputy Director Pharmaceutical Directorate presenting the BCM district's TB priorities

Figure 3: Selfies tell the story of commitment and intention to achieve healthier communities through collaboration