

MEDIA STATEMENT

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G20 Health Working Group: Cervical cancer elimination is critical to advancing gender equality, poverty reduction, and global health goals

Durban: The Government of South Africa, Unitaaid and the World Health Organization (WHO) called on countries to scale up cervical cancer interventions and progress against the only noncommunicable disease that can be eliminated, at the G20 Health Working Group meeting currently taking place in Zimbali, outside Durban.

Cervical cancer is preventable and potentially curable, as long as it is detected early and managed effectively. Yet it is the 2nd most common form of cancer among women in South Africa. According to the WHO, the disease claimed the lives of almost 350 000 women globally in 2022.

New vaccines, tests, and treatment technologies have transformed cervical cancer prevention in recent years, yet the disease continues to disproportionately impact women mostly in low- and middle-income countries where access to primary health care and preventive services are limited. Cervical cancer elimination would address a major gap in Women's health.

South Africa's G20 health agenda emphasizes the need for equitable solutions and collaborative approaches to address the health challenges of the 21st century through universal health coverage.

"Global efforts to combat cervical cancer serve as a concrete illustration of how cooperation can advance women's health and realize a shared goal to bring about the first-ever elimination of a cancer," said Dr Sandile Buthelezi, the Department of Health's Director-General. "Improving women's health isn't just a health issue – it's an economic imperative. It drives social stability, boosts productivity, and breaks the cycle of poverty", he said.

In 2020, the WHO launched the Global strategy for cervical cancer elimination, the first-ever road map for the elimination of a cancer. Since then, countries have made enormous strides in rolling out new tools and services. Vaccination against Human Papillomavirus (HPV) provides protection against infection that causes nearly all cases of cervical cancer. And a package of screening and treatment tools – including HPV tests with the option for

self-sampling and devices for quickly and easily removing pre-cancerous cells – make it possible to make lifesaving services available to women at lower levels of the health care system.

“Global health organization Unitaid has invested US \$81 million or R1.4 billion to bring down prices, increase volumes and address operational questions involved in cervical cancer screening and treatment to enable countries to scale up proven interventions with minimal risk,” said Tenu Avafia, Unitaid’s Deputy Executive Director, speaking on the sidelines of the G20 health meeting in South Africa. “However, funding shortfalls still pose enormous challenges to building national cervical cancer elimination programs in low- and middle-income countries.”

The health working group session called for a coordinated approach drawing on domestic resource mobilization, blended financing, and partnerships with multilateral development banks to scale these solutions, ensure long-term sustainability and reduce dependency on external aid.

“We have the tools and the strategies to work towards eliminating cervical cancer,” said Shenaaz El-Halabi, World Health Organization Country Representative in South Africa. “We welcome the leadership of G20 countries in advancing equitable access and sustainable solutions—because women’s lives matter, no matter where they live.”

South Africa is committed to scaling up cervical cancer prevention programs nationwide with support from Unitaid, WHO and other partners.

The South African G20 health agenda promotes solidarity, equality and sustainability. It complements the African Union’s Agenda 2063, the development agenda of Africa as the world’s fastest-growing continent, and the Lusaka Agenda. It also focuses on rebuilding momentum to reach the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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