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World Health Day Commemoration: Healthy beginnings, hopeful futures

Pretoria: The Department of Health and World Health Organization will today (Monday, 07 April) commemorate World Health Day to raise awareness about various health topics, encourage action and promote health equity. This day marks anniversary of the founding of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948, and it is observed annually on 7 April to draw attention to health topics that affect people all over the world.

This year's World Health Day focuses on maternal and newborn health and kicks off a year-long campaign aimed at improving the health and well-being of mothers and their newborn babies. The campaign, titled "**Healthy beginnings, hopeful futures**", urges governments and the health community to ramp up efforts to end preventable maternal and newborn deaths, stillbirths and to prioritise women's longer-term health and well-being.

According to the World Health Organization, globally about 300 000 women lose their life due to pregnancy or childbirth each year based on currently published estimates, while over 2 million babies die in their first month of life and around 2 million more are stillborn. That's roughly 1 preventable death every 7 seconds. Based on current trends, a staggering 4 out of 5 countries are off track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets for improving maternal survival by 2030. 1 in 3 will fail to meet targets for reducing newborn deaths.

Though, South Africa has made progress in its efforts to reduce maternal and child deaths, the rates remain high for an upper-middle-income country. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) declined from 170-200 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000, to 109.6 maternal deaths in 2022. Additional efforts will be required to reach the SDG target of less than 70 deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030.

The neonatal mortality rate, or the number of deaths of newborns under 28 days of age per 1,000 live births, is approximately 11 deaths per 1,000 live births which is in line with the SDG target. However, further declines have proven to be elusive with little progress being made in recent years.

The goals of the campaign are to raise awareness about gaps in maternal and newborn survival and the need to prioritise women's longer-term well-being; advocate for effective investments that improve the health of women and babies; encourage collective action to support parents as well as health professionals who provide critical care; and also provide useful health information relating to pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period.

Health services for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and children under-five years of age are provided free of charge in South Africa and access to and coverage of a package of essential maternal and child health services provided by Primary Health Care facilities continues to increase. Comprehensive guidelines are in place to manage health conditions in the community, primary health care, and hospital, and medicines and vaccines are procured in line with these guidelines. The guidelines are updated on an ongoing basis to reflect new evidence and developments – earlier this year, the Department with support from WHO published the revised Maternal Health Care guidelines.

The Department has also introduced a number of initiatives as part of ongoing efforts to curb maternal and child mortality in the country by increasing access to information for mothers during pregnancy and the postnatal period, parents and caregivers regarding early childhood development. These include MomConnect which uses mobile technology to support maternal and child health through free maternal health messaging via SMS or WhatsApp for pregnant women and new mothers. More than five million mothers have received messages and support during their pregnancy and child-rearing journey through the MomConnect digital platform

The second initiative is Side-by-Side campaign which aims to support mothers and families to nurture and support their young children. The Side-by-Side through radio shows broadcast in all official languages of the country, reach an audience of 3,7 million listeners each week.

However, more work needs to be done to ensure that every mother and newborn has access to services, and more attention needs to be paid to areas such as improving nutrition outcomes for children (especially with regards to stunting), providing comprehensive services including mental health services for mothers and others and addressing the health needs of adolescents.

Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO Representative to South Africa, emphasises that, “ensuring the health and well-being of mothers and newborns is not just a health priority - it is a moral imperative. As we mark World Health Day, we celebrate South Africa's progress and recommit to supporting every mother and child, especially in underserved communities. WHO remains a steadfast partner to the government in strengthening health systems, improving quality of maternal and newborn care, and accelerating progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.”

The health of mothers and babies is the foundation of healthy families and communities, helping ensure hopeful futures for us all. The delivery of a comprehensive package of care and support for mothers, newborn and their families depends on the collaborative efforts of a wide range of stakeholders in both government and civil society. The department and WHO therefore call on all role-players – communities, health and other care workers, policy-makers, researchers, and educators – to work together so that we can ensure that all mothers and young children both survive and thrive.

The WHO will host a webinar to mark World Health Day with the topic “Healthy beginnings, hopeful futures: global action for women and newborns”.

The virtual event aims to highlight global progress in maternal and newborn health and the work of countries leading acceleration efforts; to showcase the value of partnerships in action and advocacy; advocate for increased funding and political commitment to improve healthcare for women and newborns; and promote gender equity and health rights for those most at risk.

Details of the webinar are as follows:

Date: Monday, 7 April 2025

Time: 1:30 PM-3:00 PM

Virtual link: Registration: Webinar Registration - Zoom -
https://who.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3Lft72BsRZuyjSS21OrUpg#/registration

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