

JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
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Department and stakeholders call for collective support for children and teenagers living with cancer

Pretoria: The Department of Health, in collaboration with the South African Association of Paediatric Haematology and Oncology (SAAPHO), the National Cancer Registry (NCR), CHOC Childhood Cancer Foundation South Africa (CHOC), and the World Health Organization (WHO), invites South Africans to come together in support of children, adolescents, and their families impacted by childhood cancer during September's International Childhood Cancer Awareness Month.

Childhood cancer, while often seen as rare, is a major health issue and one of the top causes of disease-related deaths among children worldwide. The WHO reports about 400,000 new cases annually, with around 1,000 of these in South Africa. Locally, leukaemia is the most frequently diagnosed childhood cancer, according to the National Cancer Registry.

September, globally recognised as Gold September, is focused on raising awareness of childhood cancer. The gold ribbon has become an international symbol of strength, resilience, and hope. Behind each ribbon lies a personal story, of a child, a teenager, a family, a survivor, or a health worker. As this year's campaign reminds us: Every Ribbon Holds a Name. Every Name Holds a Story. The Department and its partners ask, "Who are you wearing your ribbon for this September?"

Raising awareness and promoting early detection are critical in improving survival rates and ensuring better treatment outcomes. Too many children and teenagers are either not diagnosed or are diagnosed too late. The Department urges all citizens to become familiar with the SILUAN Early Warning Signs of Childhood Cancer, and to seek medical attention if any signs are observed. Timely referral to specialised care can save lives.

As part of its ongoing commitment, South Africa supports the WHO's Global Initiative for Childhood Cancer (GICC), which aims to raise survival rates by 2030. Encouragingly, the national survival rate in South Africa has improved to about 60%, but it still falls short of countries where rates exceed 80%.

Families affected by childhood cancer face immense psychological, emotional, financial, and logistical challenges. Many experience strain due to travel distances to treatment centres, lack of nearby accommodation, out-of-pocket expenses, and disruptions to family life. The burden is shared not only by patients, but also by parents, siblings, and caregivers. As reflected in the global campaign #WeAllLiveIt, when a child is diagnosed with cancer, the entire family embarks on the journey together.

The Department of Health, NCR, CHOC, SAAPHO, and WHO commend the dedication of healthcare professionals, support organisations, and members of the public who offer vital care and compassion to children with cancer. The NCR remains committed to ensuring accurate data collection and analysis to inform decision-making and improve outcomes.



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According to Mr Hedley Lewis, CEO of CHOC: "Every ribbon is a reminder that no child or teenager should face cancer alone. At CHOC, we believe in the power of collaboration, and along with the global campaign, CHOC is Inspired to Act. When communities, healthcare professionals, and organisations come together, we can change outcomes."

Professor Gita Naidu, Chair of SAAPHO and Head of Paediatric Oncology at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, echoed this sentiment: "Families are torn apart by a diagnosis of childhood cancer. The emotional toll, financial hardship, and psychological strain can be overwhelming. We urge all sectors of society to rally behind these families with ongoing support."

The WHO country representative for South Africa Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi reckons that "behind every childhood cancer diagnosis is a child with dreams, a family filled with hope, and a community that can make a difference. Far too many children are diagnosed too late, and far too many families walk this journey without enough support. That is why WHO is proud to stand alongside the Department of Health and CHOC - because when we act together, we can change the story of childhood cancer from one of despair to one of survival, resilience, and hope"

In recognition of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, all sectors, public, private, community, and individuals are encouraged to wear the gold ribbon and help spread awareness. Let us remember the names, share the stories, and commit to ensuring that no child goes through cancer alone.

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