

**SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF HEALTH, DR PAKISHE
AARON MOTSOALEDI, MP**

**WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DAY
COMMEMORATION
BIRCHWOOD HOTEL AND CONFERENCE CENTRE**

26 SEPTEMBER 2025

Programme Director.

MEC for Health in the Gauteng Province, Ms Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko

The Executive Mayor: City of Ekurhuleni, Cllr Alderman Nkosindiphile Xhakaza

MMC for Corporate Shared Service, Cllr Ald Sivuyile Ngodwana

All Councillors and other political leaders present here today

World Health Organisation Representative, South Africa Country Office

Representative of the International Federation for Environmental Health, Africa Region

The Representative of the South African Local Government Association

Distinguished guests, I greet you all.

Today marks the 14th anniversary of the global environmental health community's celebration of World Environmental Health Day. Please allow me to acknowledge and thank our host, City of Ekurhuleni, also known as the country's "aerotropolis" and the Gauteng Department of Health for hosting this prestigious event. We are indeed honoured to be welcomed by your kind hospitality. I would also like to take this opportunity and thank the organising team of this event led by the National Department of Health. Your tireless dedication has translated into significant progress and success.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege and honour to address you today during this significant gathering, where we unite under the theme "***Clean Air, Healthy People.***" This theme is both timely and urgent, because the air we breathe has become one of the most defining public health challenges of our time. It is safe to say that air pollution is a silent killer, as it often causes severe health problems and premature deaths without being immediately visible or noticeable.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as you gather today, as health professionals, academia, students, government departments, private sector partners, the World Health Organization (WHO) reminds us that, seven (7) million people die prematurely each year due to air pollution. In Africa alone, over 1.1 million deaths

were attributed to poor air quality in 2019. Here in South Africa, almost 26,000 premature deaths annually are linked to polluted air, with vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly most affected, according to the South African Medical Research Council.

We often think of air pollution, health, and development as separate challenges. But when we connect the dots, we see a single, urgent story.

Poor air quality is now one of the leading environmental risks to health. The tiny particles we breathe daily don't just irritate our lungs, they are silent drivers of noncommunicable diseases, heart disease, stroke, chronic respiratory conditions, even cancers. Therefore, clean air is not just an environmental issue, but a human rights issue.

In the zeal to the realisation of this right, I would like to urge the fraternity to locate its critical and vital role within the National Health Insurance (NHI) to support its effectiveness. Our efforts should be structured and goal driven to ensure preventative and health promotion services are strengthened, and your role as practitioners is sharpened. Therefore, this commemoration provides for such opportunities to engage vigorously and to inform goals and objectives that will seek to improve health services.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Gauteng, as one of our most industrialised provinces, faces unique pressures as it relates to air pollution due to vehicle emissions, industrial emissions, and urban growth. However, despite these pressures, we should notice the strides made in surveillance, response, and building partnerships with stakeholders to protect communities. Strategies employed in the country to deal with air pollution are in alignment to global commitments under the Paris Agreement, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the WHO Air Quality Guidelines, recognising that protecting the air we breathe is fundamental to achieving the vision of “Clean Air, Healthy People.”

The critical question we must ask is this: *What is the role of Environmental Health Practitioners in protecting our communities against such environmental health threats, and are they adequately equipped, supported, and empowered to fulfil this mandate?*

Programme Director, as I address you today, I have no doubt about the competence and dedication of this cadre of health professionals. What troubles me deeply, however, is the lack of prioritisation of their work within the local sphere of government, despite the Constitution assigning this responsibility so clearly.

You will recall that around this time last year, our country was plunged into chaos following a devastating outbreak of foodborne illnesses. Tragically, many of the casualties were children. The severity of the situation led to a national disaster being classified, with the President himself addressing the nation on the urgent interventions required to contain the crisis and prevent its recurrence.

The public, however, was left shaken, many questioning the government's ability to protect their health, and above all, the lives of their children. This was not the first time we faced such tragedy. In 2017, the Listeria outbreak brought similar devastation. In both instances, the resounding question from the public was: *"Why was this not prevented? Where are the health officials entrusted to monitor food premises and ensure the safety of the food that reaches our tables?"*

The response was that *"There is a shortage of EHPs in municipalities to proactively provide these services, to the total number of more than 4,000 in the country."* The natural follow-up question is: *Why?* I wish colleagues that we can honestly answer this question.

I have been informed that since 2019, approximately 100 EHPs have retired from the system. Were those posts filled? Or were they reprioritized elsewhere?

Without enough skilled staff on the ground, at the right time and the right resources in place, our efforts to prevent disease will always fall short. The shortage of EHPs is more than just a staffing issue, it's a public health concern with real consequences for food safety, workplace conditions, and community well-being.

Contrary to other beliefs, EHPs are the unsung heroes of our health system, entrusted with ensuring that our food, water and living environments are safe, and that we are protected from preventable diseases.

Programme director, in addition to frontline personnel, our country urgently needs strong technical support to prevent future outbreaks. For this reason, I have established a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Foodborne Illnesses. This Committee will provide expert guidance on key issues such as strengthening health systems, improving surveillance, enhancing risk communication, and advancing community education. Its members are highly respected and trusted professionals with extensive expertise in the health sector. Environmental health is also at the heart of the work done by the MAC. I have reiterated in many platforms that municipalities regard municipal health services as an unfunded mandate, and as a Minister responsible

for health, I am concerned about the impact of this at service delivery level.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been reported to me that yesterday you have engaged in three pivotal topics that carry profound implications for the future of Environmental Health in our country, which include, (1) the impact of the profession's name change, (2) the scope for specialization, and (3) my intentions to redefine municipal health services under the National Health Act, 2003 and give the national office competency over 3 (three) critical functions.

Each of these issues touches not only on the identity and visibility of the environmental health profession, but also on its ability to adapt, remain relevant, and deliver meaningful outcomes for the communities we serve. These discussions are both timely and essential, providing us with an opportunity to reflect critically on where we stand and where we are headed as a fraternity. They challenge us to weigh the strengths we can build on, the opportunities that lie ahead, and the risks we must guard against if we are to ensure the profession continues to evolve in alignment with the country's health, environmental, and developmental priorities.

As government, we value these robust engagements because they help us anticipate both the foreseen and unforeseen

outcomes of change. Ultimately, our responsibility is to translate these insights into concrete policy and action. The priority must always remain the same; to ensure efficient, equitable, and effective service delivery to our communities, and to strengthen Environmental Health as a cornerstone of public health.

Ladies and gentlemen, our commitment is unwavering: “to ensure that every South African has the opportunity to live in an environment that safeguards their health, protects their wellbeing, and upholds their dignity”. We pledge not only to protect this fundamental right, but also to strengthen accountability, governance, and leadership at every level of society. In doing so, we affirm our responsibility to build a future where clean, safe, and healthy living conditions are not a privilege for a few, but a guaranteed reality for all.”

Program Director: This is why government must intensify its efforts to ensure that municipalities prioritize the appointment of Environmental Health Practitioners. Without sufficient staffing and the necessary support, our fight for cleaner environments and healthier communities will inevitably be weakened. We have received several memorandums of demand from Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) seeking employment, representing more than 1,000 unemployed graduates. While we acknowledge these concerns, it is important to clarify that the National

Department is not the direct employer for service delivery, but rather the policymaker.

In response, we have written to all 52 municipalities responsible for municipal health services, requesting the submission of their human resource plans for the appointment of EHPs. We need to understand their strategies for addressing this shortage and, more importantly, the timelines and urgent measures they intend to implement to resolve address this challenge.

In closing, I want to pay tribute to all Environmental Health Practitioners in this country. Your dedication to your work, often carried out under difficult and even dangerous conditions, commands our deepest respect. We acknowledge the risks you face, from intimidation to threats to your very safety, simply for safeguarding the health and rights of ordinary citizens.

Finally, I extend heartfelt thanks to all stakeholders and participants here today, for your passion, your partnership, and your commitment to this vital work. I wish you all a safe journey back to your respective provinces and homes.

I thank you.