

STATEMENT BY THE KWAZULU-NATAL MEC FOR HEALTH, DR SIBONGISENI M DHLOMO, ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCH OF PHILA MA PROJECT AT AMAOTI ON THE 11TH AUGUST 2009

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen;

Today marks the turning point in the reproductive, maternal and child health in our province. Within the framework of World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of health as “*a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity,*” reproductive health addresses the reproductive processes, functions and system at all stages of life.

Reproductive health, therefore, implies that people are able to have a responsible, satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.

Implicit in this are the rights of women (**and men**) to be informed of and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and the right of access to appropriate health care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant.

Living in a province with a high disease burden and incidence of non-communicable diseases (10% of non-communicable diseases, according to DBSA); women continue to be the face of disease disproportionately to their partners – men. Women continue to die from preventable illnesses such as cervical cancer, reproductive illnesses and maternal and peri-natal deaths in an alarming rate.

As the President of the Republic, Dr Jacob G Zuma, speaking at the Women's Day commemoration in Vryheid on Sunday; I want to agree and reiterate that;

“We will only pat ourselves in back when the mother and the infant mortality rates are reduced...improving the health of South Africans, especially women and children, is a key priority for the government.”

Today we are here to call on individuals and communities to put a halt on this onslaught against young women. We want to say; **women don't need to die of cervical cancer** because the disease develops slowly, after initial infection with the human *papilloma* virus (HPV). Unlike most other types of cancer, **it is preventable and treatable** - when its precursor lesions are detected early and treated appropriately.

Most women are never screened for cervical cancer either because of the journey to the nearest clinic (**and poor treatment once there**), gender based violence, myths and fears about cervical screening, or poor health services.

Having children is a partnership. It is one in which women face greater risks, both because of physiological differences and gender inequities. Women have a right to health, but protecting that right often depends on a partner's support.

The care and support of an informed husband also improves sexual and reproductive health outcomes and can mean the difference between life and death in many cases and when women need immediate medical care.

The *Phila Ma* Project will seek to bridge the gap between the need for reproductive health services and their provision. We will educate women on how to conduct self examination for breast or cervical cancer, educate women about the reproductive health rights, and launch a unified approach and targeted interventions for reproductive, maternal and child health programmes that will be driven from communities.

Men's partnership will be a mainstay of our project and is clearly essential to achieving gender equality and in influencing all of the other MDGs both directly and indirectly.

The achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly those related to health, is strongly underpinned by the progress that can be made on sexual and reproductive health. It is a pillar for supporting the overall health of communities, in particular, that of women. Ill-health from causes related to sexuality and reproduction remains a major cause of preventable death, disability, and suffering among women, particularly poor women. Apart from ill-health consequences, poor sexual and reproductive health contributes significantly to poverty, inhibiting affected individuals' full participation in socio-economic development.

As the burden of cervical cancer falls disproportionately on poor women, the Department will now work harder to reduce that inequity, and bring renewed **hope** to women. Therefore; partnering with men is an important strategy for advancing reproductive health and rights, which are so closely linked to the MDGs.

Every minute, a woman dies from preventable and treatable sexually-related and reproductive health diseases or childbirth. Every minute, a family is devastated, children lose their pillar. The lives of surviving children are put at risk. Communities suffer. And for every woman who dies, as many as 20 others are seriously harmed or injured due to sexually-related complicating diseases of childbearing age.

Women's ability to safe reproductive and maternal services is essential to protecting their health and rights. Reproductive health care - including early detection of cancers - enables women and their partners to make choices about their sexual health, have healthy babies and protect themselves from early and preventable death.

Women's health rights promote economic development. An investment in reproductive and maternal health services can be recouped four times over - and sometimes dramatically more - by reducing the need for public spending on health, education and other social services.

I thank you!