

Speech by KZN Health MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo on the occasion of a Gala Dinner for the Giving Sight to Africa project at Didima Resort in Drakensberg

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It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to be with you as you celebrate your achievement in as far as the One Million Patients milestone, giving sight to the people.

I seem to recall that just in 2007 when this figure was first mooted, one had reservations in as far as the attainment of the set target but through sheer hard work, resilience and commitment of all involved including ICEE, Standard Bank Sponsors and Department of Health personnel, today we are celebrating.

Really, one just cannot help but marvel at what has been achieved considering that ninety percent of the world's blind people are amongst the poor who are unable to access or afford eye health care.

It remains an undeniable reality that blindness condemns the affected to very little education – if at all; to a life of perpetual transport restrictions and most of all fewer employment opportunities and options.

What ICEE has achieved for the over million people is more than just giving sight to them but has also removed and done away with the permanent dependency that the sufferers had on other people who most of the time are not geared and trained for the task. They now can take decisions affecting their lives and freed their movement at all hours of the day.

You have truly broken the chains of inescapable cycle of disability, extreme poverty and lifetime of hardship for all the concerned. You have also freed the lives of sighted children of the blind parents or relatives from this extreme poverty they were destined for as without doubt their future gets to be affected since most will miss school as they take care for their blind relative.

Our Honourable Premier in his 2011 State of the Province Address indicated that if South Africa is to change the course of epidemics KwaZulu Natal must lead. Looking and assessing at what has been

achieved in the four years of operation, one can truly say KZN has brought the country closer to the attainment of set of Millennium Development Goals especially the following:

- **Goal 1:** Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

In that individuals concerned and their families are now free to eke out their own living without hindrance as we know that blindness creates a high burden of care on family members, particularly women, who need to stay home from work to care for their visually impaired relatives.

- **Goal 2:** Achieve universal primary education

Few learning options are available to blind children as all developing countries do not have special schools as well as educators competent in dealing with their special needs. Almost in all parts of our rural settings, Child-aged Carers who most of the time are girls, are less able to attend school and finish their education thus reducing their options to escape poverty when they get to adulthood.

- **Goal 3:** Promote gender equality and empower women

Lack of education makes women more vulnerable to gender oppression. Sight impairment makes them more vulnerable to violence, sexual assault and general victimization. This programme has gone a step further in ensuring that they are able to see and be able to defend themselves from abuse of any form.

You have also positively impacted on the 1999 International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and the World Health Organization quest to eradicate avoidable blindness under the VISION 2020 programme.

ICEE has also reduced the cost of eye health care by providing free treatment for the very poor and at the same time built capacity of a number of health care providers to prevent and treat blindness in the long term.

As a Department entrusted with the health and well being of our people, we are also doing all we can to deal with conditions that cause childhood blindness. Encompassed here are a group of diseases and conditions that occur in childhood or early adolescence that include corneal scarring due to vitamin A deficiency and measles infection. We move from the premise that childhood blindness is very often caused by conditions that could be entirely prevented or treated. As various Government Departments we are committed and doing our best to improving nutrition, sanitation, immunisation and providing access to child and maternal health services.

Again we thank ICEE and sponsors for all the progressive work done for the needy communities as well as for donating much needed optometry equipment to our hospitals and clinics and also for providing training to our health care personnel.

I thank you