

SPEECH BY KZN MEC FOR HEALTH DR SIBONGISENI DHLOMO ON THE  
OCCASION OF WELCOMING ABASOKWA IN KOKSTAD

13 JANUARY 2011

AmaKhosi kanye neziNduna zeSizwe

Abaholi BoMkhandlu yoMasipala

Abaholi bezenkolo

KZN Health Head of Department – Dr Sibongile Zungu, Ndabezitha

MMC Programme Coordinator – Dr. Sandile Tshabalala

Sisonke Health District Manager –Ms Gcina Radebe and her Management

Abafana ababuya Entabeni esingabo namhlanje

Imindeni yosingabo naMalunga omphakathi ahloniphekile

I again wish to thank the leadership of this area for inviting us to be part of this glorious function of welcoming all the initiates coming back to their families.

Our first visit on January 2 2011, when we welcomed the first group was an eye opening session and I wish to inform you that all what we observed and learnt

here was shared with our honourable Premier, Dr Zweli Mkhize who in turn passed it over to His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelithini.

Today I can also report that His Majesty is very elated with the progress made on all fronts with the initiation ritual (a process going beyond circumcision which is part of the transition from boyhood to manhood) that is taking place as He fully understands that it has a significant impact as a tool to reduce the spread of HIV.

You will recall that on November 5, 2010 we reported to him how we are faring since He called for the revival and continuation of this important tradition.

The King was also happy to learn that over 95.5 percent of a group of more than 18,000 men circumcised in KwaZulu-Natal had tested negative for HIV – an observation not researched yet.

The Department and I have invited Political, Traditional, Religious and community leaders to join us in welcoming you and for them to learn lessons for their areas. It is hoped that after this visit here at Sisonke District, the vibrancy will be replicated with this integrative approach for the whole Greater Kokstad community.

The good news with this is that all these young men now know their status and we hope they will be encouraged to support one another and strive to remain

negative for rest of their lives. We also encourage the community at large to support them.

The Department would also like to encourage you to;

1. Adopt a healthy lifestyle
2. Avoid Substance abuse
3. If you have to engage sexual activities ensure that it is safe.

Among other things; as men, Government expects you to take responsibility for your lives as you committed during the initiation. The community does not expect you to be involved in criminal activities include rape and abuse of any kind.

I find it very important to share with you a very sad picture about HIV prevalence among boys and girls. Between the ages of 0 – 14 years both boys and girl are largely HIV negative or HIV prevalence between 0 & 2% – this is at primary levels of education. The problem starts from higher primary to secondary and tertiary.

Once girls enter higher primary and secondary levels of education; their prevalence rises sharply from 2% to about 6% at the age of 15 – 19 yrs years or less. At this time boys remain negative or have a prevalence rate hovering below 1%.

As soon as they (girls) leave high school, at the age 15 – 19 years, girl's HIV prevalence rises further to around 8% whilst in boys it starts to rise from 1% to 3%; a small increase. I will tell you why this is so in a short while.

As girls and boys enter their tertiary education, the HIV prevalence of girls is twice that of their male peers at 3 and 8% for boys and girls respectively. You will remember that I did inform you that 99.5% of males who have been circumcised are HIV negative and these statistics attest to that but what is more important is for us to share why such a significant discrepancy between boys and girls.

I will be upfront and tell you that it is because of cross generational sexual relations – **o sugar daddy!** From higher primary school these girls are having relations with older men between 30 and 40 years where the HIV prevalence is hovering around 9%. Remember I said this is the rate for primary school girls!

Therefore, core to our visit in this area today is to say; we support you on this endeavor because we know it's never easy to operate when you have been put under heavy scrutiny. I seem to recall that when we started with our own, a headline in one NGO News Africa publication was screaming: '*Thousands face agony or death after Zulu king's circumcision decree.*'

Such utterances are not incongruent with what our President, Honourable Jacob Zuma says about us as a nation when he said;

*"We say we are united in diversity. That's what we say. We need to unpack the diversity. What do we mean when we say this? Scholars and many people have been interpreting us for decades; our culture, our traditions. Some look down upon certain traditions of others. They use their own traditions and customs as a yardstick, as a standard to judge others, and we all keep quiet. And some of the traditions are being rubbished; called names, they're backward; and we keep quiet. What is our interpretation of certain things? How should we handle one another? Who has a right to judge others more than others? Who gave that right to whoever? What is our view?"*

We consider it correct and appropriate to take advice and guidance from those that know and who have no interest in misleading like the President of Congress of the Traditional Leaders in South Africa, Inkosi Phathekile Holomisa who has boldly said:

*'I SUPPORT male circumcision because it is an important part of a custom intended to build leaders in our community. The entire initiation ceremony, including circumcision is intended to create men capable of carrying out their*

*responsibilities, protecting the weak in society and providing for their families.*

*Circumcision is part of the process of making men out of boys."*

People from other nations agree as one **Rabbi Anthony Gerson** who studied in Israel and is qualified to perform the procedure says:

*'Circumcision is a **divine imperative** of every Jewish boy. Aside from the medical benefits, it is a rite that welcomes the male child into the covenant.'*

On January 2, 2011, I listened to testimonies given by the first group that we were welcoming and will never forget what some of them said. Among the things that were said were the following

- *'I am a new creation; I am born again and I am now a man.'*
- *"I will take care and make sure I do not get HIV"*
- *"I will be responsible and make sure that I protect my family"*
- *"I have learnt that crime does not pay therefore I will not involve myself in criminal activities"*

I cannot think of any other teaching that can inspire as much, that can give a young man such conviction and as such I say there is a lot all of us as different people can learn from the secretive and sacred rites practiced by other nations.

As we welcome you, we are saying what you have been taught is highly appreciated and irreplaceable on the basis of its usefulness. You are now custodians of what is good for your families; villages and the community at large. The culture that you now embody directs and determines all aspects of your behaviour and through interaction with others it will be passed over from one generation to the next, through articulated ritual, language and symbol.

You have been equipped with mechanism and teachings that are instrumental in the maintenance of social order as wise old people would say: *Men who've been through initiation are distinguishable by their social behaviour and a particular vocabulary they learn during their time in the bush*".

Mayor Sithole and Indlondlo allow me to thank you for inviting us to be part of this important occasion. Our collaboration needs to be strengthened as we rollout this and other programmes. This ritual cannot be seen as a cultural practice without taking into consideration its medical imperatives.

As such we need to ensure that we screen all initiates before they undergo the procedure and also educate the initiates on good wound care to avert adverse events including staying away from sex for at least six weeks after the procedure. The initiation process is not a stand alone programme; it must be integrated with other programmes to achieve the desired outcomes.

Lastly; as we know that we cannot stop the continuance of the traditional circumcision practice but there needs to be thinking around strategies on how to strengthen linkage between traditional and conventional practitioners as we have successfully done in the province. These may include incorporating some aspects in the package such as the provision of health education on HIV prevention; safe circumcision; use anaesthetics; post-operation care of wounds.

With these words; I join your community leaders in welcoming you back as men – with responsibilities.

Ngiyabulela.