



MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
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World Prematurity Awareness Month - November

Pretoria: The Department of Health urges all pregnant women to access antenatal care as early as possible and to follow a healthy lifestyle including avoiding smoking, drinking alcohol or using illegal drugs during pregnancy. This will reduce the risk of preterm labour and premature birth, which is the leading cause of death in children under the age of five.

About 15 million or 1 in 10 children babies globally are born preterm each year. In South Africa, an average of 15% or 1 in 7 babies of all births are born prematurely annually. Approximately 84 000 preterm infants are born in South Africa each year and 10% of them premature infants are at increased risk of death and various other complications including respiratory, neurological and eye morbidities compared with full-term infants.

Preterm is defined as babies born alive before 37 weeks of pregnancy are completed. There are sub-categories of preterm birth, based on gestational age, and these include extremely preterm (less than 28 weeks) very preterm (28 to less than 32 weeks).

It is recommended that pregnant women should to attend all antenatal care visits or appointments throughout their pregnancy periods to enable the health professionals monitor and assess the state of health of both the mother and unborn child in order to identify early signs and symptoms of manageable and life-threatening complications such as pre-eclampsia, urinary tract infections and gestational diabetes.

South Africa ranks 24th out of 184 countries with high number of newborn deaths around the world due to complications from preterm birth. The department in collaboration with various stakeholders in the sector, has developed strategies, programmes and other interventions to effectively manage complications and prevent avoidable deaths linked to prematurity in the country as part of broader under-five child mortality prevention plan.

These include award-winning MomConnect a cellphone-based technology with over 4.5 million subscribers, developed to create a platform to support pregnant women with health promotion messages translated into official languages to improve their health and that of their infants. The other intervention is an Early Childhood Development radio campaign called Side-by-Side which reaches about 5.7 million audience weekly through 11 SABC African language radio stations and social media platforms. The implementation of recommendations as outlined in the Saving Mothers

