

The honourable Aaron Motsoaledi

Minister of Health



The vision of the Department of Health is “a long and healthy life for all South Africans”.

Early childhood – especially between birth and two years of age – is increasingly recognised as a critical window of opportunity for shaping the long-term physical, cognitive, and emotional health and development of the country’s future citizens.¹ Child mortality rates in South Africa have fallen

substantially in recent years. Whilst efforts to consolidate these child survival gains must continue, the situation allows for, and in fact necessitates, a shift in emphasis from improving child survival to a more holistic approach to early childhood development (ECD), which focuses on ensuring that every child reaches his or her full potential. In other words, our goal is to ensure that every child enjoys their right to optimal health, nutrition and development.

In providing ECD services, the health sector is required to define an appropriate, evidence-based package of care, and then ensure that this package of services is delivered to all families, mothers and children, including and especially the most vulnerable.

With regard to the package of services, our first responsibility is to ensure that each mother receives adequate care during pregnancy and delivery in order to optimise both her own health and the health of her newborn infant. HIV infection and failure to recognise and manage obstetric emergencies appropriately have been identified as the leading causes of maternal death in South Africa². Whilst the successes of the national antiretroviral programme have been well-documented, the Campaign for Accelerated Reduction in Maternal and Child Mortality in Africa strategy aims to improve maternal survival and health through intensifying training of front-line health workers in emergency obstetric care, and ensuring better access to care for women in labour through introduction of obstetric ambulances and maternity waiting homes³.

Our package of care for young children is encapsulated in the Road-to-Health booklet, which every newborn infant receives at birth, and which can be regarded as the child’s passport to health and development. The booklet contains a set of key child care messages. These include messages on infant and young child feeding which emphasise the importance of exclusive breastfeeding for six months, followed by introduction of appropriate complementary feeds. Other messages encourage caregivers to interact with

and provide stimulation for their children, and alert caregivers to danger signs in the child which indicate that the child should be taken to a health facility as soon as possible.

The booklet is also a record of key health interventions which the child receives – this includes a record of the child’s growth, development and the services such as immunisations and vitamin A supplementation that the child has received.

The Road-to-Health booklet therefore contains all the elements of the department’s contribution to ECD, and provides a tool for coordinating the services which the child receives. The booklet should ideally be used in all interactions between the child’s caregiver and health workers; this includes both professional and community health workers.

Preventive and promotive health services for young children have historically been provided at primary health care (PHC) facilities, with 2.7 million visits by children under five years being recorded at these facilities in the 2012/13 financial year.⁴ The PHC restructuring process aims to ensure that services are brought closer to communities and households through deployment of PHC or ward-based outreach teams. Each outreach team comprises a nurse and a number of community health workers who play an important role in providing health education and other health promotion activities, and in ensuring and assisting mothers and children to access preventive and curative health services, as well as services provided by other sectors. Outreach teams in collaboration with school health services will also ensure that children attending ECD centres receive preventive and promotive health services.

Although the Diagnostic Review of Early Childhood Development⁵ undertaken in 2012 concluded that many elements of comprehensive ECD support and services were already in place, important gaps were also highlighted. Reducing stunting among young children and improving services for children with disabilities represent important challenges for the health sector. The Department of Health is committed to working with other government departments as well as other stake-holders in addressing these and other challenges and working tirelessly to improve the health and development of young children in South Africa.

- 1 Grantham-McGregor S, Cheung YB, Cueto S, Glewwe P, Richter L, Strupp B (2006) Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries. *The Lancet*, 369(9555): 60-70.
- 2 National Committee for Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths (2012) *Saving Mothers 2008 – 2010: Fifth Report on the Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths in South Africa*. Pretoria: Department of Health.
- 3 Department of Health (2012) *South Africa’s National Strategic Plan for a Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal and Child Mortality in Africa (CARMMA)*. Pretoria: Department of Health.
- 4 District Health Information. Accessed 13 July 2013.
- 5 Richter L, Biersteker L, Burns J, Desmond C, Feza N, Harrison D, Martin P, Saloojee H & Slemming W (2012) *Diagnostic Review of Early Childhood Development*. Pretoria: Department of Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation & Inter-Departmental Steering Committee on ECD.