

## **MEDIA STATEMENT ON INFANT DEATHS ATTRIBUTED TO DPT VACCINATIONS.**

**11 FEBRUARY 2009**

With reference to recent statements in the print and electronic media about “the DPT vaccine blamed for infant death”, the Ministry of Health and Social Services wishes to respond as follows:

Even though it is not yet proven that the deaths were in any way caused by vaccination, let me first of all on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Social Services extend our sincere condolences to all the families who lost babies.

The Expanded Programme on Immunization, or EPI, is one of our most important primary health care programmes in Namibia. The Ministry of Health and Social Services adopted the immunization schedule for children under one year of age at Independence in 1990. This schedule is followed by many countries in the world and is based on World Health Organization (WHO) policies and guidelines. This schedule is to protect children under one year of age against the six common childhood preventable diseases, which are Polio, Measles, Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus and Tuberculosis.

### **What is DPT Vaccine?**

Diphtheria, Pertussis and Tetanus (DPT) is a 3 in one combined vaccine given to infants less than 1 year old to protect them against Diphtheria, Pertussis and Tetanus (DPT). The vaccine is given to all infants at six (6), ten (10) and fourteen (14) weeks of age.

## **Advantages of DPT vaccination**

All children who are fully immunized with DPT will not contract the three above - mentioned childhood diseases.

## **Quality Assurance**

The Ministry of Health and Social Services procures all vaccines through a tender process which adheres to the World Health Organization (WHO) standard quality criteria. It is now for close to twenty years that the Ministry of Health and Social Services has been immunizing children with WHO approved vaccines and no major problems have occurred in any clients.

I would like to state that through the process of pre-qualification, the World Health Organization (WHO) advises all vaccine procurement agencies on the quality, efficacy and safety of vaccines. All vaccines used by the MoHSS meet the WHO requirements, that means, high quality and very stringent testing criteria.

We can further confirm that a number of specific measures are in place to ensure that vaccines issued in our hospitals and clinics are safe (see details in attached report).

However, in response to the recent publications, the Ministry of Health and Social Services wishes to confirm that vaccines, like any other medication, can result in side effects which may differ from person to person. Also, in some cases coincidental events occur, which may appear as if they are the result of vaccination, but in fact they are unrelated.

## **Adverse Event Following Immunization**

An adverse event following immunization is defined as a medical event or incident that takes place after immunization, causes concern and is believed to be caused by immunization. In rare cases of vaccination many events that occur just after vaccination might well have occurred in any case whether or not the child was vaccinated. Most vaccine adverse events are minor and temporary, such as a painful thigh or mild fever or crying of the child and can often be controlled by providing an infant dose of paracetamol syrup to manage the symptoms.

There are also some common misconceptions amongst the general public about immunization like “Vaccines cause many harmful side effects, illnesses and even death – not to mention possible long term effects we don’t even know about” .

Another myth is that DPT vaccine causes Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). This logic is faulty and in fact several studies have found that children who received DPT vaccination are less likely to get SIDS. WHO also confirms that the existing evidence does not indicate a causal relationship between DPT and SIDS.

It is also a fact that the benefits of vaccines greatly, and I repeat greatly, outweigh the risk of side effects. Many more diseases and deaths would occur without vaccination.

### **Cases Reported**

With regard to the number of cases affected the following:

There has been only one case reported from Windhoek. This case has been investigated by a number of experts, including a paediatrician, pharmacologist and epidemiologist.

As for the quality of the DPT vaccine utilized, the same vaccine vial was also used for other children. These children have been traced and none of them have had any negative effect. I wish to state also that an on site visit established that the vaccine was definitely not expired. Vaccine from the same batch has been sent to the South-African National Institute of Communicable Diseases for further testing and we are awaiting the results of the analysis. It has also transpired that the child in question was administered other medication at home, which could possible have caused some of the symptoms.

The Ministry is currently also investigating the deaths of one 1month old boy from Oshana region, one 41 day old girl from Oshikoto Region, and one 42 day old girl from Omusati Region. At this stage it is not yet clear that any of these children had actually received vaccination shortly before they died.

On behalf of the Ministry of Health and Social Services I wish to assure the public that all necessary measures are taken when it comes to the safety of vaccines. We cannot deny the fact that Immunization is one of the most successful and cost effective health interventions ever. It has eradicated Small Pox and lowered the global incidence of Polio by 99%. It has achieved dramatic reduction in illnesses, disability and death from Diphtheria, Tetanus, Whooping cough and Measles. Immunization will help to achieve the Millennium Development Goals on reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating diseases.

I hereby would like to urge the public not to keep their children away from Immunization sessions. Without vaccination, we will see a resurgence of vaccine preventable diseases amongst our children which can lead to outbreaks resulting in death and disability.

My Ministry will further inform the general public through the media as soon as our ongoing investigations are completed.

I thank you.

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**MR. K. KAHUURE**  
**PERMANENT SECRETARY**