



**OPENING SPEECH AT
THE REGIONAL DRUG ACCESS WORKSHOP**

BY:

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MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

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Safari Court Hotel, Windhoek

Director of Ceremony

Her Excellency, Ms. Gail Dennis Mathieu, Ambassador for the United States Of America

Honourable Deputy Minister, Comrade Petrina Haingura

Dr. Faith Mwangi-Powell, Director of African Palliative Care Association (APCA)

APCA delegation

Ms. Magda Robalo, WHO Country Representative

Dr. Ben Ofuso Koanteng, of UNDP

Officials of the Government Institutions

Representatives of NGOs, FBOs, CBOs

Distinguished Facilitators

Members of the media

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I am honoured to be here today to officially open this important palliative care workshop with its emphasis on access to essential pain medicines for people with progressive, life-limiting illnesses in great pain. I join the Executive Director for African Palliative Association in welcoming you to Namibia for this important meeting. Indeed, Sub Saharan Africa is the epicentre of these most painful diseases, recording the highest prevalence and burden-rates in the world for diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Cancer-related cases, amongst others. Therefore, I am gratified to note that our countries, with the most severe burden of these diseases, are participants in this most important meeting.

As you all know, the World Health Organisation defines palliative care as an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families as they face life-threatening illnesses. The relief of individual suffering through the early identification, assessment and treatment of pain, as well as other problems – physical, psychosocial and spiritual – is paramount in this respect.

As African countries scale up the provision of comprehensive and quality palliative care to those living with life-limiting illnesses, we need to remember that effective pain management should be central to this process. Recommended medicines for pain control, such as oral morphine and other opioids, must be available and accessible to all patients enduring pain. Unfortunately, and hence the need for this workshop, the limited, and sometimes non-existent, access to pain medication due to overly restrictive laws and regulations across African countries is a major challenge to the provision of quality palliative care services.

More widely, whilst there is growing realisation among African governments of the potentially important role that hospice and palliative care can play across the continent – especially in addressing the AIDS epidemic – there remains insufficient support for palliative care. As a result, support for, and the availability of, essential medication like oral morphine to treat the pain of those with life-limiting illnesses has been woefully inadequate in many countries.

I note, at this point, that in an era of antiretroviral therapy, there is often reluctance among governments to scale-up palliative care and ensure the availability of pain-relieving medicines. However, ART is only one aspect of palliative care; what is needed are comprehensive palliative care programmes that address the person as a whole, including the management of their pain, as well as the side-effects of, and sometimes non-adherence to, ART.

In short, ART scale-up should integrate and embrace pain management to achieve the best quality of life for patients.

In the light of what I have said, this workshop is very timely, as it seeks to initiate long-term solutions to the lack of access to effective pain medication in Africa. In this regard, of course, the Government of Namibia has taken significant steps forward to ensure, not only greater access to palliative care for those in need, but more specifically to facilitate increased access to the use of opioids for pain management by changing the legislative environment within which they are provided. Some of the strategies my Ministry implemented to achieve this included:

- The integration of palliative care in the Third Medium Term Plan on HIV/AIDS as a component of the minimum health care package.
- The employment of a Senior Program Manager for Palliative Care and Opportunistic Infections to take a lead in the promotion and development of palliative care in Namibia
- The inclusion of palliative care in the National HIV/AIDS Policy, which states that quality palliative care including adequate pain management, is a right for all patients
- The national adoption of the WHO Integrated Management of Adolescent and Adult Illnesses (IMAI) strategy, including the palliative care module that has been adapted to the Namibian context.

The inclusion and explanation of palliative care in the draft home-based care standards and guidelines.

- And the development of an essential drug list for palliative care which includes oral morphine.

This workshop will provide an ideal opportunity for you all to network with and learn from one another, and to devise advocacy strategies for greater drug availability and access for your respective countries. And after you leave this workshop, I know that the African Palliative Care Association will continue to support you through the implementation of your country strategies. Moreover, I hope similar workshops will be initiated in all regions of Africa in the near future and that you will all be committed to supporting these efforts, as well as advancing your work in your own respective countries.

As I conclude, I must say that on behalf of the Government of Namibia, we are honoured that this workshop is taking place in our country, allowing us the opportunity to share our experiences with you. We see this meeting as a clear indicator of the need to encourage and support multinational collaboration for the expansion of palliative care generally and increased drug access for effective pain management specifically in sub-Saharan Africa.

Lastly, I must convey our gratitude to Africa Palliative Care in Africa (APCA) for organising this workshop and to all its sponsors present here today for their support.

I wish you a pleasant stay in Namibia, and very fruitful deliberations. With those closing words, I officially declare this workshop opened.

I thank you for your kind attention.