

Closing the immunisation gap

Despite the availability of effective vaccines, 1.5 million children across the world, including South Africa, die each year from preventable diseases.



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Three in every 10 South African children do not receive all their vaccinations, leaving them vulnerable to deadly diseases that could easily have been prevented.

South Africa lags behind continental average

“One in four children in Africa is still not receiving the vaccinations he or she needs,” says Professor Charles Wiysonge, deputy director of the Centre for Evidence-based Health Care at Stellenbosch University’s faculty of medicine and health sciences (FMHS).

“Only 70% of children in South Africa receive all their vaccinations – this is less than the average for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, which is estimated at 77% by the WHO and the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF),” says Wiysonge, who also serves on the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunisation as well as the African Task Force on Immunisation.

Increased commitment from government

According to him, there are several reasons why children don’t receive all their vaccinations. In general, the child who doesn’t have access to immunisation in Africa is likely to be marginalised, living in poorly-served rural or remote areas, or deprived urban settings. In addition, a new phenomenon is emerging in well-served urban settings in South Africa known as vaccine hesitancy, where people may accept all vaccines or only some vaccines, but are hesitant to take them up, or may totally reject all vaccines,

“It is within our power to close this immunisation gap. Increased political and financial commitments are required from African governments to maintain the current achievements and make progress. Parents, guardians, adolescents, adults, and health workers also need to understand the vital importance of keeping immunisations up to date,” says Wiysonge.

Vaccine preventable deaths

A total of 1,5 million children die each year from diseases that can be prevented by vaccines. These include:

- 476,000 deaths from pneumococcal disease
- 453,000 deaths from rotavirus diarrhoea
- 199,000 deaths from haemophilus influenzae type b
- 195,000 deaths from pertussis
- 118,000 deaths from measles
- 59,000 deaths from neonatal tetanus

Vaccine success story

Measles used to kill millions of children, and in some parts of Africa people had a saying that one can never count his or her children until measles has come and gone.

However, accelerated immunisation activities have had a major impact on reducing measles deaths. It is estimated that in 2000 more than 500,000 children under five years of age died from measles worldwide, but in 2015 the number of child deaths caused by measles had reduced to about 100,000, an 80% reduction in child deaths.

It is estimated that measles vaccination prevented more than 17 million deaths between 2000 and 2014.

Close the Immunisation Gap is the theme for World Immunisation Week marked from 24 to 30 April.

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