

HST CALLS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING POLICY

The HEALTH SYSTEMS TRUST (HST), is calling for effective implementation of the country's cervical cancer screening policy, which is to offer all women three free cervical (Pap) smears in a lifetime, ten years apart, beginning at age 30. This largely preventable cancer is the leading cause of death from cancer among South African women, who have one of the highest rates of cervical cancer globally. However, access to PAP smears to detect early lesions which are treatable, is not available to many women in South Africa, particularly in poor and rural areas. "We are not suggesting a new approach, but rather that the health system focuses on getting the basics right, and ensures that ALL women have access to this service in all regions of the country," said Dr Lilian Dudley, Chief Executive Officer of Health Systems Trust.

The HST reiterates that the current policy is the most cost effective and can, if adequately implemented, reach most women. Coverage has been increasing slowly since the policy was introduced in 2000, but to date just over 2% of women above 30 years are receiving PAP smears in the public sector every year. This translates to less than 20% of women having been tested in the first seven years since the implementation of the policy. Professor Lynn Denny, author of 'Prevention of Cervical Cancer' in the South African Health Review 2006, states that South Africa has the capacity to deliver an effective screening programme, but needs to ensure the allocation of sufficient resources such as trained personnel and infrastructure to make it happen.

HST, which has been contributing to the development of a comprehensive, equitable and effective national health system in South Africa for 15 years, also calls for increased awareness so that women know to ask for this service at public clinics. "More needs to be done to generate awareness of cervical cancer and the role of screening programmes, particularly in the less urban areas, to encourage women to take advantage of the three free cervical pap smears in a lifetime policy," added Dudley.

As cervical cancer progresses earlier to invasive cancer in women whose immune systems are compromised due to HIV, it is vitally important to integrate cervical screening into HIV/AIDS prevention and care services to ensure that all HIV positive women have access to PAP smears.

In addition to screening, there is the imminent availability of a vaccine against human papilloma virus (HPV) - the cause of cervical cancer. However, two significant barriers to the provision of the vaccine in the public sector are cost and health service infrastructure. She concluded saying, "So, this brings us back to a call for the full implementation of the present cervical cancer screening policy, which is still the most cost effective option that we have".

More information is available at www.hst.org.za

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INFORMATION ON HEALTH SYSTEMS TRUST

The Health Systems Trust, a leading national organisation supporting the development of health services.

Vision

Health systems supporting health for all in southern Africa

Mission

To contribute to building comprehensive, effective, efficient and equitable national health systems by supporting the implementation of functional health districts in South Africa and the region.

Principle Objective

To promote scientific research into health systems in South Africa with the principle objective of designing and planning programmes and evaluations thereof towards restructuring of the health system and the development of a comprehensive National Health System based on equity.

HST Trust Deed, 1992

Since 1992, the Health Systems Trust (HST) has been contributing to the development of a comprehensive, equitable and effective national health system in

South Africa. More recently HST has begun to work more widely within the SADC region.

Our core activities are health systems research, health systems development, advocacy, capacity development and information dissemination. These activities are implemented through core programmes of Research, the Initiative for District Support and Community Development and HealthLink.

The underlying principles that guide HST are support for the Primary Health Care philosophy and a commitment to equity and efficiency. HST's uniqueness lies in the ability to integrate knowledge generation, policy development and practice in health systems development.

Our projects and programmes are geared to support and monitor transformation towards a more equitable provision of health services, especially to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged.

The role and practice of HST in district health system development, health systems research, electronic communication for health workers and reporting of progress particularly on health equity and health services delivery is widely acknowledged.

HST is guided by an independent Board of Trustees, which comprises a diverse group of leaders with professional standing and expertise in health systems development and public health. HST has a sound working relationship with the Department of Health, and also works closely with parliamentarians, academic and research institutions, and civil society.