



## ***Family Digest 54***

**March 2023**

### **World Tuberculosis Day**

Each year World Tuberculosis Day (TB) is commemorated on 24<sup>th</sup> March to raise public awareness about the devastating health, social and economic consequences of the disease, and to increase efforts to end the global epidemic. The date marks the day in 1882 when Dr Robert Koch announced that he had discovered the bacterium that causes TB, which opened the way towards diagnosing and curing this disease.<sup>1</sup> This year's theme for World TB Day is *'Invest in Action to End TB NOW! Get Screened. End Stigma. Save Lives.'*<sup>2</sup>

Every year, 10 million people fall ill with TB, despite its being a preventable and curable disease. And 1.5 million people die from TB each year – making it the world's top infectious killer disease. TB is also the leading cause of death of people with HIV. "In 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that around 56 000 deaths occurred in South Africa due to TB. This is a figure not dissimilar to the official number of Covid-related deaths in the same year. We have a TB epidemic in South Africa, but it is one largely occurring among the poor and marginalised."<sup>3</sup> Khayelitsha, in the Western Cape, has one of the highest TB- and HIV-infection rates in the world. Both historically and presently, highly infectious TB is most active among the recently urbanized, those living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, and in poverty-stricken areas with poor nutrition and limited access to health care. Khayelitsha fits this profile, as do so many other informal settlements throughout the country.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the WHO, announced recently that "the WHO is committed to supporting countries to step up their response, by expanding access to services to prevent, detect and treat TB as part of their journey towards universal health coverage, and to strengthen their defences against epidemics and pandemics."<sup>4</sup> However, multi drug-resistant TB continues to be a pressing public health concern. The situation was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which interrupted the diagnosis and treatment of TB, with many being unable to access their medication.

On the occasion of World TB Day 2023, the WHO announced the expanded scope of its Director-General's 'Flagship Initiative on Tuberculosis' over the period from 2023 to 2027 to support fast-tracking progress towards ending TB and achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by 2030.<sup>5</sup>

Typically, symptoms of TB infection include coughing, a compromised immune system, weight loss, night sweats, and fevers during the day. However, recent research indicates that "researchers have uncovered that up to half of people who have active TB don't have any symptoms. They may not be very ill at all. Little is known about whether those with asymptomatic TB spread the bacteria to others, or whether all such cases will go on to develop symptoms".<sup>6</sup> This points to the increasingly complex epidemiology of TB. Furthermore, "just like with COVID, there's a long version of TB, called post-TB lung disease. This condition can emerge even after people with TB have finished their courses of treatment. Post-TB lung disease causes damage to someone's lungs and makes it hard to breathe. It affects up to 30% of TB survivors".<sup>7</sup>

"In South Africa alone, more than 300 000 people will be living with tuberculosis this year. Approximately 20% of TB survivors will have some kind of damage to their lungs and almost a quarter will have

mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.”<sup>8</sup>

The links below provide further information regarding this serious public but preventable health concern.

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-03-23-tb-is-south-africas-silent-epidemic-awareness-can>

<https://www.who.int/news/item/23-03-2023-who-steps-up-the-director-general-s-flagship-initiative-to-combat-tuberculosis>

<https://www.gov.za/world-tb-day-0>

<https://bhekisisa.org/multimedia/2023-03-23-listen-is-this-the-new-tb-patient-about-half-of-infected-> There is a Podcast available using this link.

<https://bhekisisa.org/opinion/2023-03-24-the-forgotten-form-of-tb-that-can-carry-on-forever/> There is a Podcast available using this link.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-tb-day/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.za/world-tb-day-0>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-03-23-tb-is-south-africas-silent-epidemic-awareness-can>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-03-2023-who-steps-up-the-director-general-s-flagship-initiative-to-combat-tuberculosis>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-03-2023-who-steps-up-the-director-general-s-flagship-initiative-to-combat-tuberculosis>

<sup>6</sup> <https://bhekisisa.org/multimedia/2023-03-23-listen-is-this-the-new-tb-patient-about-half-of-infected->

<sup>7</sup> <https://bhekisisa.org/opinion/2023-03-24-the-forgotten-form-of-tb-that-can-carry-on-forever/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://bhekisisa.org/opinion/2023-03-24-the-forgotten-form-of-tb-that-can-carry-on-forever/>

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