

## **FIRST ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH NETWORK SEMINAR 2010**

Speech by Mrs. Aneliswa P.R. Cele  
Director of Environmental Health, National Department of Health

20 APRIL 2010

Programme Director

Academics

Research Institutions

Leadership of Health Professions Council of South Africa

Leadership of South African Institute of Environmental Health

Senior officials from the Department of Health, other Government  
Departments and Municipalities

Environmental Health Practitioners

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure, honor and gratitude to address you at this very First Environmental Health Research Network Seminar of its kind, as well as to touch base with some of you once again and perhaps with most of you for the very first time and hopefully not the last time. (We should do this more often).

It is in gatherings of this nature where we come together as stakeholders and peers to engage collectively in deliberate efforts that are geared towards improving the health of the people of SA. We are proud as the Department of Health to be part of this worthy course and we are certainly looking forward to interact and share lessons and experiences with all converged here today. I am confident and convinced that this is a worthwhile endeavor

The DoH through its interventions recognized that the local environmental problems and the ability to manage them are to a larger extent influenced by social, political and economic forces at both the local and the international level. Some of these key interventions include but are not limited to the 10 Point Plan Programme that entails measures to ensure attainment of improved health outcomes for all South Africans, as well as targets set in the health-related millennium development goals (MDGs).

As the custodians of the health and well being of all South Africans, DoH has a constitutional and legislative obligation to fulfill and that is to ensure provision of access to health care services, thus sustainable development aspects are prioritized, considered and incorporated (at the social, economic and environmental levels) into its policy and legislative development processes and actions.

Ladies and gentleman we are talking here, today about environmental health research, we need to ask ourselves questions about why do we really need it? Why are we not doing it? When do we start doing it? How will it benefit us as a country and perhaps even benefit the rest of world and I hope that with this network it is the start towards answering all of these questions and more.

In my own view, research is not about scratching the surface, this will not even attempt to provide us with concrete answers to why things are the way they are, however we need evidence based information and this colleagues calls for us to dig deeper to establish facts, validate and verify our hypothesis. As professional in the field let's all be on a fact-finding mission let us conduct studies and more studies, develop research papers, let us be visible and vigilant enough to take this profession to greater and better heights.

Climate change is one issue that needs to be given careful consideration. Environmental Health is becoming more and more important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the effects of climate change are becoming evident. In the recent past, the Department has witnessed in some provinces outbreaks of disease such as cholera, Typhoid, Rift Valley Fever, etcetera .These are some on of the examples which give an indication that something needs to be done by the Department rapidly and Environmental Health Service is seen to be corner stone in addressing some of the challenges.

An increased knowledge of the members of the public of their environmental health rights is continuously posing a challenge to Environment Health as a profession. We have to be certain about our state of readiness in dealing with complaints about unsafe environment, which is seen to be on an increase. The generic role of EHPs in pollution prevention is more important now than ever before.

Chris J. Wiant; recognized at the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) Annual Educational Conference in Las Vegas as the recipient of the Walter E Snyder Award. **The Legacy of a Leader in Environmental Health**, suggests “In a democracy, governments and health departments do not mold a population into a cultural pattern by directives, regardless of their technical validity. The most effective role of a public health official in influencing permanent environmental changes is that of a democratic leader who helps community and neighborhood groups to study their problems and seek a solution which they can, in turn, carry out.” I personally would want to align myself to this ideology and in my opinion it is essentially indication of the huge amount of work that still lies ahead and we all need to feel obliged to act on it.

The Department is currently undertaking a number of programmes with specific focus to Environmental Health and these are aimed at overhauling and heightening the quality of delivery of Environmental Health services thereby improving the health and well-being of our communities. These programmes include inter-alia the Health and Hygiene Education programme, which is aimed at promoting health awareness, improving behaviour and changing the mindset and attitudes of communities around water and sanitation associated health and hygiene practices in South Africa, particularly at domestic level, safeguarding them against the spread of water and sanitation related diseases targeting youth, young children and those affected by HIV and AIDS and other sicknesses. Through this intervention the Department hopes to fight, minimise and curb water and sanitation related infections that could be easily preventable through education.

The other project, which the Department is involved with, is “Health Care Waste Management and Hazardous substances”. Health care waste is considered and classified as hazardous waste because of the health risks it poses to humans.

Poor management of health care waste has been seen as a huge challenge that requires the expertise of Environmental Health Practitioners. EHPs are often the first line of response to health care waste management issues. Thus it is vital that EHPs are equipped and capacitated to adequately address such issues.

A gap was also identified in management and monitoring of chemicals with a special focus to those chemicals that are listed as Group I and Group II in the Hazardous Substances Act (Act 15 of 1973). In assisting Provinces to fulfil their function of providing hazardous chemicals control, the Department has provided training and building capacity amongst Provincial Officials.

Other activities include - (just to mention but a few):

- Finalising the Environmental Health Policy
- Review of Environmental Health Regulations
- Finalising the Port Health Policy
- Finalising the Standard Operating Procedures for Port Health.
- Framework for the Management of sick patients/passengers with suspected communicable disease entering South Africa
- Monitoring implementation Environmental Management Plan
- Guidelines for the monitoring of indoor air quality in SA
- Guidelines for Environmental Health Impact assessment.
- Development of the Climate Change Adaptation Plan for DOH.

Having mentioned some of the activities discharged by the Directorate: Environmental Health, I see this network as a strong body of knowledge where academics, research institutions, environmental health interest groups, activists and professionals come together with a common interest i.e. **Research**, which will assist in shaping the Environmental Health policies.

The Directorate: Environmental Health is currently awaiting approval by the National Health Council for the establishment of the National Environmental Health Forum. I believe that this network body will seek to provide a platform for guidance and support to this Forum and the Directorate on numerous areas of research i.e. if only given a chance to do so. The Directorate Environmental Health supports this initiative. Point 10 of the DOH 10 Point Plan Programme actually encourages initiatives of this nature when it calls for the Department to “**Strengthen Research and Development**”. The Directorate: Environmental Health therefore commits from this moment forward to work hand in hand with the network and to give support where needed.

Colleagues much as we acknowledge that research like any other task comes with its own challenges we need to rise above all odds and prove to be competent and interested in this domain. May I also take this opportunity to bring

to your attention the fact that the Regulations Defining the Scope of Profession of Environmental Health, R698 was signed by the Minister, Dr A Motsoaledi on 01/06/2009, which simply means that it is now a legally binding document that requires everyone's attention. Please acquaint yourself with the document.

In conclusion, I strongly believe this marks the beginning of a new journey, the rise of the Environmental Health Profession. I personally would like to thank CSIR for this initiative, for inviting us to this seminar and also for recognising the importance of the Department being part of the network.

Let us all make full use of this network; its success lies in our hands.

**I THANK YOU!!!**