

Minister of Health

The Honourable Dr Aaron Motsoaledi

This issue of the *South African Child Gauge* focuses on the importance of the First 1,000 days and the role of nurturing care during early childhood in promoting lifelong health, emotional and social well-being as well as improved educational outcomes. In doing so it makes a powerful case for increased investment in the well-being of young children, their mothers and their families.

Early intervention has the potential to decrease inequality and interrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty. Maternal and child nutrition during the first 1,000 days affects not only the child's growth, cognition and subsequent school attainment, but also impacts on lifelong risk of developing chronic disease.

The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD Policy) recognises the interlinked nature of child growth, health and development and calls on the health sector to play an expanded role in early childhood development, in order to ensure that young children not only survive but reach their full potential. Optimising the development of young children cannot be separated from efforts to optimise the health and wellbeing of women and their families.

The *Child Gauge* provides an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved since the NIECD Policy was approved by cabinet in 2015. It is encouraging to note that coverage of a package of essential maternal and child health services (predominantly provided by Primary Health Care facilities) has continued to increase during this period. Mothers and young children have continued to benefit from free health services, and innovative communication campaigns have increased access to information for mothers during pregnancy and the postnatal period (through MomConnect) and provided support to parents and other caregivers regarding the full scope of early childhood development (through the Side-by-Side campaign).

However, much remains to be done. Because health services for mothers and children are integrated into routine health services at community, primary health care and hospital



levels, coverage and quality of these services are highly dependent on the overall coverage and functioning of the health system. Building a strong and resilient health system and ensuring that all policies and guidelines take the needs of women, children and adolescents into account are the best ways to ensure that the health sector delivers on its commitment to ensuring that mothers and children survive and thrive. A stronger health system will be able to expand the scope of services provided and place more emphasis on nutrition (especially addressing stunting and childhood obesity) and maternal mental health.

A strong and resilient health system in turn requires a more effective and equitable financing system, hence our commitment to implementation of National Health Insurance (NHI). NHI is a health financing system that pools funds to provide access to quality, affordable personal health services for all South Africans based on their health needs, irrespective of their socio-economic status. This will allow every South African to access comprehensive health-care services free of charge at the point of use at accredited clinics, GPs, other health providers and hospitals. NHI will increase access to health services for everyone, including pregnant women, mothers, children and adolescents, by ensuring that access to health services is based on need rather than ability to pay.

Community health workers (CHWs) have the potential to enhance maternal and child health and development, and there is a need to ensure that CHWs prioritise maternal and child health and nutrition services.

The delivery of a comprehensive package of care and support for young children and their families depends on the collaborative efforts of a wide range of stakeholders in both government and civil society. I therefore call on all role-players – communities, health and other care workers, policy-makers, researchers, educators – to work together so that we can ensure that all mothers and young children survive and thrive, and that no child is left behind.