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Author: Foster Mohale and Yogan Pillay

HEALTH

Could you or a family member have TB? Act now

FOSTER MOHALE AND YOGAN PILLAY

EVERY year on March 24, World TB Day, the global community focuses on tuberculosis (TB). It was on March 24, 1882 that Robert Koch announced he had discovered what causes tuberculosis – a bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. However, TB has been around for much longer – probably for the past 9 000 years!

We often think of TB as being related to poverty, which it is, as it is related to poor nutrition. However, because TB, like Covid-19, is airborne, anyone can contract TB.

The theme for this year's World TB Day Commemoration is: "Yes, You and I can end TB". It reflects a commitment for each of us to care of our health and those around us.

South Africa, together with India, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

contribute more than two-thirds of the estimated incidence of TB cases globally. Although TB has not received the same attention and strict public health measures as Covid-19, such as lockdowns, mask-wearing and social distancing, it remains a deadly lung disease resulting in 1.6 million deaths and more than 10 million people fell ill from TB in 2021, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

What are the TB statistics for South Africa? The WHO reported that there were about 56 000 deaths from TB in 2021, with over 300 000 people estimated to have contracted TB in the same year. Yet, only slightly over 181 000 people with TB were reported to have been treated.

This means more than 120 000 people who had active TB in 2021 were not on treatment and were therefore capable of spreading TB to others.

But TB is curable and preventable. In addition, treatment is available free

in all public health facilities in South Africa.

One of the contributing factors to TB morbidity and mortality rates is either not presenting to health facilities for diagnosis and treatment or very late presentation to health facilities after displaying signs and symptoms.

However, this is not always the case, as many people have no symptoms. Similar to Covid-19, this is called asymptomatic or sub-clinical TB.

The country's first National Tuberculosis Prevalence Survey, conducted in 2016 and reported in 2018, confirmed that South Africa has a high TB burden, including many people with undetected TB in the community.

An important finding in this survey was that a high proportion (57.8%) of TB cases in survey participants did not report any TB symptoms at the time of the survey and yet had bacteriological confirmation of TB. The survey also identified a high TB burden, especially

in males compared to females, and high prevalence among people aged 35-44, as well as 65 years and older.

We need to inform people, families and communities that have TB symptoms, as well as those who do not have symptoms but may have TB, about what they need to do to protect themselves and those around them.

People with symptoms of TB (coughing for more than two weeks, night sweats, weight loss, loss of appetite, chest pains, fatigue) must go to their nearest health facility for a diagnosis, and if positive, be put onto TB treatment, which lasts six months (longer for drug-resistant TB).

It is critically important, like for all antibiotics, to complete treatment, to prevent a recurrence of TB or the development of drug-resistant TB.

Anyone at home or work who has been in contact with a person with TB symptoms or who has been diagnosed with TB must be tested for TB as they

may have been infected.

The Department of Health, with its partners (the Clinton Health Access Initiative and Praekelt) with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, developed a cellphone platform people can use to check their symptoms and which directs them to their nearest public health facility to get diagnosed and treated.

One can check TB symptoms on either WhatsApp or USSD by simply dialling 0600 123 456 on your phone as a contact and send "TB" to the number and follow the prompts.

On USSD, you can dial *134*832*5# and follow the prompts. To date, more than 120 000 people have used TBCheck to check their TB symptoms – we are aiming for at least 1 million.

Mohale is spokesperson for the National DoH. Pillay is extraordinary professor at Stellenbosch University (Division of Public Health and Health Systems)

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