

Department baffled by vaccination rates

THE Department of Health has acknowledged it did not know how many babies were unvaccinated because it had only a hazy idea of the size of the population it was targeting. The issue has officials so concerned that they are planning a door-to-door survey next year to get better figures, according to the department's chief director for child, youth and school health, Nonhlanhla Dlamini. The department's Expanded Programme of Immunisation is one of its most important initiatives for improving child health, and it regularly claims high coverage rates. Its most recent annual report, for example, said there was a 95.1 percent coverage rate. The figure refers to the benchmark DPT3 vaccine that protects children against diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus. However, Médecins Sans Frontières last week drew attention to a discrepancy between the department's figures and those published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), which were much lower at 72 percent. Médecins Sans Frontières's country manager Daniel Berman said his organisation was concerned that SA was paying relatively high prices for its vaccines compared to other developing countries, and could not measure its results. Dlamini said the WHO/Unicef reports and Department of Health both had flawed data, for different reasons. One of the problems with the WHO/Unicef data was that it drew on an HIV/AIDS survey that asked supplementary questions on vaccine uptake. Dlamini said the focus of the research was not immunization, so the department wondered how reliable the data was. She said the WHO/Unicef also reported separately on DPT3 and Haemophilus influenzae B, yet these were now administered as a single shot in SA. The department's figures were inaccurate because the population estimates it used were too low. These estimates were drawn from Stats SA's Census 2001, which had undercounted babies under the age of one, partly because it did not include immigrant babies. Dlamini said vaccinations were provided free to all babies at government clinics, regardless of nationality. This meant that when officials calculated the coverage rates for a specific vaccination, they were dividing the total number of babies who got the shots by a target population that was too small, and the result was an inflated coverage rate. This could explain why there were measles outbreaks in SA in 2009, despite the fact that the government reported very high coverage rates, said the former executive director of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases Barry Schoub. He said that ideally there should be 90 percent coverage, if not 95 percent, to prevent outbreaks. The Department of Health reported a 98 percent coverage rate for measles in 2009, while the WHO reported 62 percent. Dlamini said the department would convene a meeting of experts next month, which would include officials from the WHO, Unicef, the Medical Research Council and Stats SA to design a new survey.

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