Govt takes battle against TB to prisons, mines

By Dennis Cruywagen

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Government is stepping up its efforts to fight tuberculosis (TB) in prisons, mines and schools.

Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe. (Image: GCIS)

At Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town, all new inmates are to be tested, while all mineworkers are also to be screened over the next 12 months.

State of the art technology, known as the GeneXpert, will be used at Pollsmoor Prison to test all new inmates. The GeneXpert machine reduces the time needed to diagnose the presence of TB from about six weeks to two hours, thereby allowing medical staff to treat patients sooner, stop the disease from spreading and improve the efficacy of government's TB Control Programme and National Strategic Plan.

Six of these machines were officially handed over by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe to the Minister of Correctional Services, Sibusiso Ndebele, at Pollsmoor today, which is also World TB Day.

Said Motlanthe: "We are prioritising the roll-out of these machines in correctional facilities, mining and other congregate areas with elevated risks of infection."

This was because government believed in returning rehabilitated offenders to society as healthy and responsible community members, he said.

Big challenge

South Africa was facing a big challenge in HIV and TB, an airborne, opportunistic infection that thrived in the presence of a

weakened immune system.

"In a manner of speaking, we have left no facet of life untouched, which is why we have today opted to join the Correctional Services' communities to entrench the anti-stigma message that HIV and TB do not discriminate and therefore our responses shouldn't too," Motlanthe said.

The country had to fight the scourge together to attain the vision of zero new infections, zero discrimination, zero Aids-related deaths and zero new vertical transmissions.

The world had been under the impression that TB had been defeated. "Now it has come back to haunt us," said Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi, who was present at the handover ceremony.

It's estimated that nine million people across the world have TB, with 28% of this total living in the six Southern African Development Community member countries.

South Africa has the third highest tuberculosis infection rate in the world. However, Motsoaledi was optimistic that South Africa would reach its Millennium Development Goal of halving TB infections by 50% in the 1,000 days left before the target date 2015.

At Pollsmoor Prison, where former President Nelson Mandela spent six of his 27 years in prison, 735 inmates were screened for TB between March 1 and 31 this year. Ten of them were diagnosed with TB, while 165 who were suspected of having the disease underwent more tests. Twenty-one of this group also tested positive for TB.

Stopping the spread of infections

"Everyone who has TB can possibly infect 20 others in one year. They've saved at least 400 others from getting TB," Motsoaledi said, adding that prisoners were also given a booklet educating them about TB, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

Because government was serious about stopping TB, each of the 21 inmates would have to supply Motsoaledi's department with their residential addresses so that there could be follow-up visits to family members living there. In future, all inmates would also have to furnish home addresses.

In 2011, South Africa unveiled three new strategies to fight the pandemic in the mines, among children and in prisons. Originally, it was thought that the highest prevalence of TB occurred in the mines. However, the incidence of the disease in overcrowded prisons was thought to be higher than that in mines.

In schools, Motsoaledi referred to a recent survey in Khayelitsha, where 2,721 people from 2,037 households visited were screened. While 650 suspicious cases were detected, only 300 people were prepared to give sputum for testing. Thirteen of them were found to have TB and have started treatment. However, the reaction of the sample group was indicative of the stigma associated with TB.