



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



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INTERNAL MEMO

Date:	21 September 2020		
To:	The Honorable Dr ZL Mkhize, Minister of Health	From:	Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on Covid-19

RE-OPENING OF TRADITIONAL INITIATION SCHOOLS

Request for Advisory sent to MAC/Problem/Concern

Should traditional initiation schools be advised to re-open at this stage of the Covid-19 epidemic?

Recommendations

- Traditional initiation schools to be re-opened for male circumcision under Level 1 only when stringent precautions are in place and have been checked for compliance. It is likely that the next 2-3 months may be required to put all the required procedures in place – so, a tentative date for re-opening could be 1st December 2020, provided the Covid-19 transmission rates remain under control.
- The schools to be opened under guidelines that will make them comply with Covid-19 prevention protocols.
- Local Initiation forums or committees to be established to monitor compliance with Covid-19 protocols over and above what they ordinarily monitor.
- Activities to be implemented in preventing transmission of Covid-19 during performance of tradition of male circumcision should include the following:
 - The pre-screening that is currently used in assessing the readiness of boys to go for initiation to include screening and testing for Covid-19, and certificate that is clearing the boy should be the basis for granting permission.
 - All those leaders who are involved in performing the procedure and supervising the initiates to also be screened and tested before they are involved in these activities.
 - Initiation Monitoring Teams who directly interact with initiates to be under quarantine once they commit into the activity of supervising the initiates.
 - Initiation Schools (Amabhuma) should only accommodate a number of initiates that will allow them a distance of 1.5 meters apart.
 - Initiates are not to share utensils or equipment used in the Amabhumas.
 - Amabhuma to be well ventilated and deep cleaning be done from time to time to ensure enhanced hygiene levels.

- Traditional Surgeons and Assistants (Ingcibi Namakhankatha) to use masks and wash their hands according to Covid-19 protocols.
- They should also be expected to use gloves as they service the initiates at all times. Gloves to be changed between initiates and procedures.
- Parents must ensure that, they make provision for masks and sanitizers for the initiates.
- Those who are responsible for preparing and bringing food to initiates should adhere to outlined protocols at all times.
- All Traditional Surgeons and Assistants should be subjected to training on Covid-19 protocols and other healthcare standard practices, before opening of traditional initiation schools.
- Random tests and screening for Covid-19 should be done in areas considered as hotspots to ensure rapid response.
- Medical Practitioners should be integrated with monitoring Teams to ensure enhanced balanced capacity.
- No visitors to be allowed in the Amabhumas including the young boys (amaNqalatha) who usually assist the initiates.
- Ceremonies related to the tradition to be limited to ≤100 people, and to be held between 8am and 5pm and sharing of utensils to be prohibited (hamba bhekile). The quantity of alcohol to be minimized as far as possible.
- Hand sanitizers to be made available in these ceremonies
- No ceremonies if rates of transmission increase.
- Community forums to be established to monitor compliance to Covid-19 prevention protocols during these ceremonies

Rationale for Recommendations

- Male circumcision is one of the most commonly performed traditional procedures in South Africa with a wide variation among the different regions of the country.
- It has been reported to be protective against HIV infection with adjusted odds ratio of 0.30 (95% CI 0.09-0.93).¹
- Traditional male circumcision is a ritual that is performed as a rite of passage from childhood to manhood. Thus it is seen as process of approving one for readiness for adulthood.²
- The notion of manhood is valued and respected by various cultural groups practicing traditional male circumcision in South Africa. In many settings traditional male circumcision is preferred over the medical male circumcision.³

Concerns about male circumcision during this pandemic

- There are reports in mid-September of Covid-19 outbreaks in schools in the Eastern Cape. To avoid viral outbreaks at initiation schools, substantial precautions are required.
- It has been reported that that some of the initiation school accommodate the initiates in cold and dusty holding rooms without ventilation.
- The boys often start the initiation school as a group and therefore often resulting in overcrowding.

¹ Rasmussen DN, et.al. The when and how of male circumcision and the risk of HIV: a retrospective cross-sectional analysis of two HIV surveys from Guinea-Bissau. PAMJ. 2016, 23 (21).

² Siweya T, et.al. The notion of manhood embement in the the practice of traditional male circumcision in Ngove Village, Limpopo, South Africa. Am J Mens Health. 2018, 12(5):1567-1574.

³ Douglas M, et.al. The consideration of socioeconomic determinants in prevention of traditional male circumcision deaths and complications. Am J Mens Health. 2018, 12 (3): 597-607.

- Traditional leaders may promote circumcision through traditional ceremonies, and these ceremonies may result in breaches in observing infection prevention and control measures and implementing non-pharmaceutical interventions.
- Rates of complications following traditional circumcision have been reported to be as high as 35-48%, the most common complication being infection.
- Among males circumcised traditionally about 35.2% experience adverse event compared to 17.7% among those circumcised medically (OR 2.53, 95% CI 1.89-3.38).⁴ Bleeding and infection have been reported to be the most common adverse event and might result in a need for hospitalization.
- Festivities or ceremonies of the initiates returning back home from initiation school involve gatherings of family members, and the communities from the local villages. These ceremonies could be superspreading events as it might be difficult to observe social distancing, and some of the activities are held in closed spaces (inside the house) which might not have adequate ventilation.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Kind regards,



PROFESSOR SALIM S. ABDOOL KARIM

OVERARCHING CHAIRPERSON: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

DATE: 21 September 2020

CC:

- » **Dr S Buthelezi (Director-General: Health)**
- » **Dr T Pillay (Deputy Director-General: National Health Insurance)**
- » **Dr S Zungu (Project Lead: Sectoral Response to Covid-19)**
- » **Incident Management Team**

⁴ Bailey R. C. et al Bulletin WHO, 2008.