



POVERTY ALLEVIATION = GOOD MEDICINE



Picture courtesy from Dr Tony Moll, church of Scotland Hospital, Tugela Ferry.

Health workers can have a dramatic impact on malnutrition and disease simply by brushing up on the qualifying criteria for welfare grants and encouraging patients to apply.

The importance of doctor intervention emerged last month when the SAMJ spoke to welfare officials, social workers and educationists about the problems besetting the social security system.

Cati Vawda, director of the Children's Rights Centre in Durban, explained that 'increased malnutrition and the impact of HIV/AIDS aggravates poverty and means more pressure on health workers. Good medicine equals good grants - it's that simple'.

She said the greatest challenge was helping children living without adult caregivers to access services. Young girls tend to shoulder the main burden, forsaking school to take care of sick relatives or parents.

According to Idasa's latest income analysis, 57% of all South African children live on less than R200 per month and 75% live on less than R400 per month.

This is in spite of a national Welfare and Social Development budget of R28 billion last year.

Research shows that at least half of all

South African children do not have the birth certificates so vital to accessing grants.

57% of children (under 18), live on less than R200 and 75% live on less than R400 per month.

Key players all told the SAMJ that ignorance of qualifying criteria and the lack of sufficient people with influence willing to 'go in to bat' for poor people, aggravated delivery in an already overburdened and clumsy system.

Senior bureaucrats in education and welfare confirmed that officials sometimes turned away legitimate claims and that AIDS was killing thousands before claims could be processed for payout.

One top official who declined to be named, said school principals were refusing to grant the school fee exemption to pupils acting as heads of households because schools were not compensated in budget allocations. The principals are in a bind. There are so many kids eligible that once the ball starts rolling, they fear a dramatic drop

in school income.'

However since the problem was identified, a plan to compensate school budgets was being drawn up in conjunction with the welfare department.

Mr Selvin Jehoma, Chief Director of Grant Systems and Administration in the Department of Social Development, said that provincial data showed the national average waiting time for social grant approval was currently 54 days. Sometimes it exceeded three months but Western Cape and Gauteng delivered in an average of 35 days.

Delays had been reduced after legislation was introduced in December 2001 forcing welfare offices to pay beneficiaries from the time they applied, instead of a maximum of three months payout after a wait of sometimes over six months.

He claimed the state was covering 2.5 million of the estimated 4 million children eligible for the child support grant (62.5%), 2.1 million of the country's estimated 2.7 million qualifying elderly, and 4 000 war veterans.

There was a 'take up' of about 125 000 foster care grants in a population that was impossible to estimate because of the rigorous court requirements.

He 'very roughly' estimated there to be about 500 000 severely disabled children in the country of whom 53 000 were claiming by the end of January 2003.

He said the burden of accessing both the system and doctors was responsible for this low figure.

Jehoma said the estimate for adults unable to work because of disabilities 'hovers around 1.1 million' of which 882 000 were actually being serviced at the end of December 2002. 'A big problem is that many people just don't know that they qualify,' he emphasised.



Last year his department spent R1 million on advertising grants on television and in newspapers and was currently measuring the impact of this.

NGO programmes with the Department of Home Affairs, Social Development, Soul City and the media had drawn crowds of up to 30 000 people for vital educational rallies at towns in the Free State and the KwaZulu-Natal midlands last year.

He said a great frustration was delays in Home Affairs issuing birth certificates and identity documents to caregivers, the lack of welfare infrastructure (2 400 offices nationally and 8 000 pay points excluding banks and post offices).

'We've got a lot to do on disbursement, not to mention improving the conditions in which people get the money,' he admitted.

He did not have sufficient staff to serve the population and was forced by policy to hire from within the civil service. Major disparities and variances in the human resources needs, application and processing systems also existed between provinces, he said.

'My unit is only 18 months old,' he stressed, adding that his major task at present was to implement a national standardised system and setting up what will be called, the 'South African Social Security Agency'.

President Thabo Mbeki's extension of the Child Support Grant age qualification from 0-7-year olds to 0-14-year olds would be introduced 'incrementally' and would add another 3.5 million children to their books.

Social Development Minister, Zola Skweyiya, explained that this would be phased in over three years with 12-14-year olds finally being added to the system by the 2005/2006 financial year.

Provincial ministers have agreed to fast track uniform policy and service standards for those infected by

HIV/AIDS, especially those disabled by the disease.

Jehoma said he was unaware of any current research that quantified the numbers of these children. Dr Maria Mabetoa, director of the HIV/AIDS programme in his department, however confirmed that her staff had begun a count of child-headed households.

At least half of all children do not have the birth certificates so vital to accessing grants.

Ms Theresa Guthrie, programme manager for Children's Economic Security at the UCT Children's Institute, said recent research had shown that HIV/AIDS 'makes poverty and accessing welfare a hundred times worse. It's hard to separate out AIDS orphans for special attention when they all are suffering dire poverty, malnutrition and from poor services'.

The difficulty in getting birth certificates and the insistence of welfare officers on criteria which often did not exist in law, led to people who were already feeling weak and tired, 'simply giving up'.

She slammed the requirement that child support be paid to an adult primary caregiver, saying this had the effect of children being abused by adults in order to claim grants. 'If three quarters of our children are living in dire poverty, then something is desperately wrong,' she said.

Dr Martin Prewe, Education Department

Director responsible for school management, governance, safety and education districts, appealed to doctors to spread knowledge of grants and nutritional schemes to their communities.

A spokesman for Home Affairs said that at the end of 2002, approximately 28 300 000 South Africans possessed identity documents. He was unable to locate the statistics on birth certificates in time for the SAMJ deadline or verify the research figure of 49% of citizens possessing them.

He was able to say that the department had 220 offices countrywide, 132 mobile units and that counter hours were mostly from 8am to 3pm.

Home Affairs criteria stipulate that an identify document be processed within two months, provided the application form is correctly completed.

Chris Bateman



Life and death in rural KwaZuluNatal.