

## 2 VACCINE-PREVENTABLE DISEASES

### Diphtheria: update on outbreak in KwaZulu-Natal Province

Although there have been no confirmed cases of diphtheria in KwaZulu-Natal Province (KZN) since 13 June 2015, the KZN Department of Health reported a suspected case on 24 July 2015 that is currently under investigation. A 12-year-old boy from Harding (near Port Shepstone) presented to hospital on 24 July 2015 with typical symptoms of severe respiratory diphtheria (a 'bull neck', extensive pharyngeal membrane and respiratory distress) and died later the same day. Appropriate samples were collected, and results of microbiological investigations are pending.

As at 27 July 2015, there are 16 reported cases of diphtheria (11 confirmed, one probable, three possible and one under investigation). The number of contacts of case-patients with diphtheria who have been identified as asymptomatic carriers of *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* has increased from three to six, and all of these persons have been managed appropriately. The KZN Department of Health has continued with containment and preventive activities, which have included contact tracing and management, catch-up vaccination campaigns at schools in the affected districts, and community mobilisation campaigns. The National Department of Health is planning to include a booster dose for diphtheria in its upcoming HPV vaccination campaign for Grade 4 learners (10- and 11-year-olds).

A review of Td booster vaccination coverage for 6- and 12-year-old children in South Africa has been conducted, with KZN reporting coverage rates of <50%. These low vaccination coverage rates very likely contributed to the increased vulnerability of older children and adolescents to infection with *C. diphtheriae*.

In view of the newly reported suspected case under investigation, we urge healthcare workers and laboratory workers countrywide to be on the alert for possible cases of diphtheria.

Recommendations for the management and public health response of diphtheria cases are available on the NICD webpage, in the guidelines section (<http://www.nicd.ac.za/?page=guidelines&id=73>). Healthcare professionals with queries can also contact the NICD Hotline at 082-883-9920 (a 24-hour service for healthcare professionals).

**Source:** Division of Public Health Surveillance and Response, NICD-NHLS; Microbiology Laboratory, NHLS KwaZulu-Natal Academic Complex; Diagnostic Media Production Laboratory, NHLS Green Point Complex; Clinicians at hospitals in eThekweni and Ugu Districts, KwaZulu-Natal Province; KwaZulu-Natal Province Department of Health; eThekweni Municipality; Ugu District Department of Health