



media release

World Health Day, 7 April 2024

Empowering women's health: Prof Salome Maswime champions cervical screening

World Health Day, 7 April: World Health Day is celebrated annually on 7 April to mark the anniversary of the founding of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 and to draw attention to health issues concerning people all over the world. World Health Day is a global campaign, inviting everyone from global leaders to the public in all countries, to focus on a single health challenge with global impact. The theme for 2024 is "My health, my right." This year's theme was chosen to champion the right of everyone, everywhere to have access to quality health services, education, and information, as well as safe drinking water, clean air, good nutrition, quality housing, decent working and environmental conditions, and freedom from discrimination. Focusing on new and emerging health issues, World Health Day provides an opportunity to start collective action to protect people's health and well-being.

Championing cervical screening in South Africa (SA): Prof Salome Maswime is an obstetrician, gynaecologist and Head of Global Surgery in the Department of Medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT); and recipient of the 2023 NSTF-SAMRC Clinician-Scientist Award. Through her dedicated efforts, Prof Maswime has played a pivotal role in ensuring that South African women have equitable access to high-quality health services. Her groundbreaking medical research is aimed at finding measures to reduce the negative health outcomes of all women who undergo caesarean section (CS) births in SA.

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to decrease maternal deaths: According to [Statistics South Africa \(Stats SA\)](#), and its latest report: *The Status of Women's Health in South Africa: Evidence from selected indicators*, maternal mortality has decreased steadily between 2012 and 2020, from about 145 to about 88 deaths per 100 000 live births. This is one of the major indicators included in the measurement of the attainment of the SDGs, the goal in this case being 70 maternal deaths per 100 000 live births by 2030, which is attainable for SA.

This report also says that the delivery by CS rate between 2018 and 2020 was 28% on average for the country. It was at this level for three years in a row. In each province, the rate also remained fairly steady over these three years. However, there is great inequality between the provinces. KwaZulu-Natal has the highest rate at 35%; the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Free State and Gauteng are doing very well at 30%; but Mpumalanga is the lowest at a consistent 22%.

According to the [2015/2016 District Health Barometer report](#), by the Health Systems Trust, since 2000, there was a surge in the number of caesarean sections in SA, in both the public and private sectors. According to a 2021 article in Daily Maverick, the private sector CS rate among young mothers was 63%, much higher than that of the public sector's 13%. This number is surprising for this age group as they are unlikely to have age-related complications during childbirth. Reasons cited for the preference for C-sections include availability and easy access to advanced medical services, women falling pregnant at older ages opting for it to reduce risks during pregnancy and childbirth, and fear of labour or anxiety around the anticipation of delivery. But it is mostly the preferred choice now due to it being presented as the best option by healthcare professionals, from their belief that CS is safer and better. This subtle coercion stems from fears of litigation from many obstetricians and gynaecologists (OBGYNs) since they are held responsible for maternal mortalities and/or any birth complications. The lack of adequately trained nurses and qualified midwives in the country could also be part of the reason.

The choice to undergo a CS should not be made simply because of fear, but by the mother, after a serious discussion that sufficiently informs her of the risks and benefits of both modes of childbirth. There is significant risk with both.

NSTF-SAMRC Clinician-Scientist Award

Winner: To mark World Health Day, the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) celebrates Prof Salome Maswime, who won the NSTF-SAMRC Clinician-Scientist Award at the 2023 NSTF-South32 Awards, known as the 'Science Oscars of SA'.



The award category is proudly sponsored and initiated by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). Prof Maswime received the prestigious award for her contribution through pioneering the field of Global Surgery in Africa as part of a drive for greater equity, and access to, much-needed surgical care and finding measures to reduce the maternal mortality from caesarean sections in SA. She is devoted to ensuring safe medical care for all women. Early in her career, Prof Maswime lost a patient to anaesthetic complications, because she and her team did not have the skills to help. She stated: "These are skills that can be taught to medical officers and junior doctors — you don't need to be a specialist."

Even within the hospital space, there's a lot of things that we can do to improve the flow of work and to make our services accessible to many more people.

The Division of Global Surgery at UCT, headed by Prof Maswime is one of the founding institutions to develop a global surgery research and education programme in Africa. She defines global surgery as an amalgam of many health disciplines to enhance the capacity of healthcare professionals to best serve the needs of their patients in a timely fashion. Her work, finding measures to reduce maternal mortality from CS in SA, led her to become one of the pioneers of global surgery as a discipline in the country.

A major milestone for her, was having been afforded an opportunity to participate in a meeting with the WHO. It was at this point where Prof Maswime realised that there was still plenty of work to be done in medicine, starting with specifically understanding the patients and being fully engaged with them. She contented: "It's one thing to operate on a woman with cervical cancer, to remove the uterus and to do all the major things. But has anyone stopped to ask patients, 'How much do you know about pap smears?' or 'Do you do pap smears routinely?'" Prof Maswime concluded: "Even within the hospital space, there's a lot of things that we can do to improve the flow of work and to make our services accessible to many more people".

For the youth: For additional insights into the diverse functions of healthcare systems, delve into the [Hospital](#) tile on the [STEMulator.org](#) platform. The STEMulator is a fun interactive learning platform and project of the NSTF [proSET](#) membership sector.

About the NSTF (National Science and Technology Forum): NSTF is an independent non-profit stakeholder body and network – a civil-society forum of over 130 organisations involved in science, engineering, technology (SET) and innovation in SA.

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References/Sources:

- [International observances](#) (internationaldays.org)
- [World Health Day 2024](#) (who.int)
- [World Health Day - PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization](#)
- [World Health Day](#) (nationaltoday.com)
- [World Health Day 2024: Theme, Significance, History, Objectives, Importance, and Key Focus Areas](#) (asthmabhawan.com)
- [South Africa's high rates of Caesarean section – what's happening in the private sector? South Africa's high rate of Caesarean section. What's happening in the private sector?](#) (dailymaverick.co.za)
- [A changing birth: What's behind SA's skyrocketing c-section rates? - Bhekisisa](#)
- [Caesarean section rates in South Africa: A case study of the health systems challenges for the proposed National Health Insurance](#) (scielo.org.za)

About the NSTF

The National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF), established in 1995:

- is a broadly-representative stakeholder body for all science, engineering and technology (SET) and innovation organisations in South Africa
- gathers stakeholders around burning issues of national and global interest, across the public and private sectors, including matters of public policy
- includes a network of professional societies in SET and STEM education (STEM = science, technology, engineering and mathematics) - the NSTF [proSET](#) membership sector.
- recognises, awards and profiles the outstanding contributions of individuals and groups to SET and innovation through the prestigious NSTF Awards
- runs and supports collaborative projects and youth outreach, including recognition of top performance in mathematics and science, role modelling, bursary and STEM career information
- runs and supports the STEMulator.org which attracts youth and educators to Explore>Discover>Learn the world of STEM including careers. (Established by NSTF [proSET](#))

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