South Africa (SA) is among the top ten countries worldwide with the highest burden of tuberculosis (TB), which accounts for two-thirds of all TB infections globally.¹ In 2021, approximately 304 000 people had TB, which means that every two minutes a person gets infected.² TB is still the leading cause of death in SA, accounting for 56 000 deaths in 2021.¹

**Are we truly making progress in the fight against tuberculosis?**

According to the Global Tuberculosis Report (2022), the progress achieved in the years leading up to 2019 has been impeded, halted or reversed, causing global tuberculosis (TB) targets to fall behind schedule. A call for more vigorous efforts, supported by increased funding, are urgently needed to counter and reverse the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB. According to the report, the necessity for action has become even more pressing due to the war in Ukraine, ongoing conflicts, a worldwide energy crisis, and the associated risks to food security, all of which are expected to exacerbate some of the underlying factors contributing to TB.¹

The current generation of young people is the largest in history, with over one-third of the world’s population aged between 10 and 24 years. As future leaders and contributors to growth, productivity, and innovation, investing in their health and wellbeing by harnessing their potential as catalysts for change is crucial in ending deadly epidemics such as TB. Young people are disproportionately affected by TB and play a significant role in a country’s social and economic capital, especially in developing countries. To fully harness the youth’s potential in TB eradication efforts, the World Health Organisation (WHO) launched a youth initiative called 1+1 in 2019 to mobilise young people to fight TB. This initiative culminated in a Global Youth Townhall that resulted in a Youth Declaration to End TB.³

“*Yes! We can end TB, but it starts with YOUth*. By engaging young people in the fight against TB, we can harness their energy, creativity, and passion to create a world where TB is a thing of the past. On March the 24th 2023, several organisations such as TB Proof, Western Cape Government, University of the Western Cape, TB-HIV Care, and the City of Cape Town all came together to empower our country’s youth by hosting a public health campaign in honour of World TB Day.

Mandela famously said in 2000, at the inaugural Laureus World Sports Awards: “Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.”

What better way can be used to unite the youth to End TB than a game of soccer. The soccer event was hosted at Nkazimlo Primary School in Khayelitsha, Western Cape. Approximately 200 grade seven pupils gathered after school to enjoy a day of sports and arts, along with discussions about TB. Various TB survivors shared their stories of how they overcame TB and the stigma that is associated with the disease. Community doctors and nurses educated the youth on how to identify and prevent TB and provided them with a local person to contact or go to if they suspect that they themselves or family members have TB. A “myth buster” session was held, and the children could answer questions and actively engage in conversations about TB. The fun did not stop there! Two intense soccer matches were played. The final match ensured for great watching pleasure. All the team players received medals, while the winning team received a TB Proof trophy that will be kept in the principal’s office.

“It was so nice to hear real stories about people who have survived TB. I could see on the children’s faces that it had an immense impact on them because it becomes real. TB is not just a disease you learn about from your textbook; it affects real people, and it shouldn’t be stigmatised. We all breathe. By teaching them from a young age we can help end the stigma around TB—which will ultimately help eradicate TB as people will seek treatment earlier and not fear judgement.” – Brenda Knipe, TB Proof Core Group Member, School of Pharmacy, University of the Western Cape (UWC).
Pharmacists play an important role in informing all ages about the signs and symptoms of TB, as well as precautionary measures to minimize the spread of the disease. The event gave us an insight of what education about TB in the younger population looks like and how we can impact the prevention and spread among them. It was inspiring to see the children participate in the activities, join in on conversations and ask questions. They are our future and a crucial part in making South Africa TB Proof!” – Elize Human, School of Pharmacy, UWC.

“I felt that the awareness was targeted strictly to the youth - which was great to see. It was informative, concise, fun, and kept the children engaged the entire day. I was impressed by how well the children answered the questions. Educating our youth about TB is one of the most important driving forces to ending TB. The world already has the artillery to win the war against TB however, it is the education about the disease that is lacking.” – Duran Thomas, School of Pharmacy, UWC.

The African proverb “Ubuntu”, meaning “I am because we are” was in the air that day as the children cheered their friends on. The smiles on their faces said it all when the winning team held the cup in the air. Maybe we should learn from the children and have a more “Ubuntu” approach to ending TB.

The clock is ticking if we want to achieve the World Health Organization’s (WHO) End TB Strategy to eradicate TB by 2030.

References