

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

ON THE

ON THE CONJUNCTIVITIS RED EYE OUTBREAK IN ZAMBIA

BY THE

THE MINISTER OF HEALTH (MRS MASEBO), MP

Madam Speaker, I wish to thank you for granting me this opportunity to update the House on events threatening the public health security of our people and our country, Zambia. Specifically, I will address the eye infection known as conjunctivitis outbreak affecting Mambwe and Chadiza Districts in Eastern Province. The House may wish to recall that on 21st March, 2024 during the Matter of urgent Public Importance segment Madam Speaker, directed me to issue a ministerial statement on the contagious disease outbreak in some districts of Eastern Province.

Madam Speaker, your directive followed the question that was posed by Hon. Sefulo, hon. Member of Parliament for Mwandia Parliamentary Constituency. He wanted to get a comment from the Minister of Health on the contagious disease that has affected Mozambican truck drivers at Chanida Boarder.

Madam Speaker, allow me to reiterate to this August House that this Government, through the strong leadership of our Republican President, His Excellency Mr Hakainde Hichilema, attaches great importance to securing the health of our people and the nation at large.

Madam Speaker, on 7th March, 2024, our health workers from Kakumbi Rural Health Centre in Mambwe District, reported an illness affecting the eyes of several pupils, primarily boarders, at Mfuwe Day Secondary School. A rapid response team, comprising members from Mambwe District Health Office and Kamoto Mission Hospital, thereafter visited the school to investigate

the reported disease outbreak. They established that the index or first case was a sixteen year old girl who had presented with red eyes associated with excessive tearing, itching and irritation on 6th March, 2024. The following day, seventy-two other pupils subsequently showed itching, swelling of eyes, slight pain, tearing, mild headaches and very red eyes. A few learners had slight eye discharge.

Samples were collected from a number of patients and laboratory analysis were conducted. The results showed that this was a viral infection of the covering of the eye and also called Eye flu or Pink Eye.

Madam Speaker, our Provincial Health Office in Eastern Province further received a report three days ago that seventeen truck drivers transiting from Mozambique into Zambia had presented with similar eye symptoms. This was at Chanida Border Post in Chadiza District.

Madam Speaker, further, Northern Province has also reported of similar cases. On the 7th March, 2024, we recorded eye infections from Mpulungu Urban Health Centre, Mpulungu Port Health Post and Kaizya Health Post. This was among three index cases involving male aged one year, female aged four years and a female aged Twenty-seven years. Since then, 220 cases have been reported from Mpulungu District. This is in the Northern Province. Countrywide, we have over 1,500 patients reported with the same eye infection. Eastern Province has recorded 1,303 cases with Mambwe District being the most hit.

Madam Speaker, this eye infection, commonly known as red or pink eye, is an inflammation of the thin, clear layer covering the white part of the eye and inner eyelid. While typically caused by viral infections, it can also result from bacterial infections, allergic reactions, or blocked tear ducts in infants. Although it can be irritating, it rarely affects vision. It is highly contagious and is spread by contact with the eye secretions of an infected person.

Madam Speaker, the symptoms may include the following:

- (a) Pink or red color in the white of the eye;

- (b) Swelling of the conjunctiva (the thin layer that lines the white part of the eye and the inside of the eyelid) and/or eyelids;
- (c) Increased tearing;
- (d) Discharge of pus, especially yellow-green (more common in bacterial conjunctivitis);
- (e) Itching, irritation, and/or burning;
- (f) Feeling like a foreign body is in the eye(s) or an urge to rub the eye(s);
- (g) Crusting of eyelids or lashes sometimes occurs, especially in the morning;
- (h) Symptoms of a cold, flu, or other respiratory infection may also be present;
- (i) Sensitivity to bright light sometimes occurs; and
- (j) Contact lenses that do not stay in place on the eye and/or feel uncomfortable due to bumps that may form under the eyelid.

Madam Speaker, the common risk factors are:

- (a) Contact with infected persons;
- (b) Poor hygiene;
- (c) Contaminated personal articles like facecloths, pillows etc;
- (d) Crowded living or social conditions, you will normally find this in schools especially elementary schools and military barracks.

Madam Speaker, the public including those affected must not panic. While the transmission is very high, it is self-limiting and will not affect the eyesight of the affected. We encourage everyone to consider the following when affected:

Practice Good Hygiene:

Like we always say, wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before and after cleaning your eyes, or applying prescribed eye medicines to your infected eye. Please do not self-prescribe or use herbal medicines. Do not use the same eye drop dispenser/bottle for your infected and non-infected eyes; and avoid touching or rubbing your eyes, as this can spread bacteria or viruses from your hands to your eyes.

Avoid Sharing Personal Items:

We are in a habit of sharing personal items, please avoid that, do not share towels, washcloths, pillows, or other personal items with individuals who have conjunctivitis and avoid sharing eye makeup, contact lenses, or contact lens cases with others.

Keep Surfaces Clean:

Clean and disinfect frequently-touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, countertops, and shared electronic devices, to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses. Wash pillowcases, sheets, washcloths, and towels often in hot water and detergent, wash your hands after handling such items.

Seek Prompt Medical Attention:

- (a) If you experience symptoms of conjunctivitis, such as redness, itching, discharge, or eye pain, seek medical attention promptly;

- (b) Follow your healthcare provider's recommendations for treatment and follow-up care to prevent complications and reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others;
- (c) Avoid touching or rubbing your eyes. This can worsen the condition or spread it to your other eye; and
- (d) Do not share face clothes.

Madam Speaker, as I conclude, I would like to reiterate that this eye infection is highly transmissible and we have seen how it has spread from one country to the other. It is eminent that the infections if not well contained will spread to other parts of the country. Please let all those infected recover from home and avoid moving in the community in order to reduce chances of more spread.

Madam Speaker, my clarion call to hon. Members of this august House is to engage their communities and put on the priority list of development, WASH, Water and Sanitation facilities in the communities using—

Mr Speaker, as conclude, I would like to reiterate that this eye infection—conjunctivitis, is highly transmissible and we have seen how it has spread from one country to the other. It is eminent that the infections if not well contained will spread to other parts of the country. Please, let all those infected recover from home and avoid moving in the community in order to reduce chances of more spread.

Mr Speaker, my clarion call to members of this august House is to engage their communities and put programmes such as Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Water and Sanitation facilities on the priority list of development, in the communities using the Community Development Funds (CFD). Communities must all be implored to practice good hygiene habitually.

Mr Speaker, I thank you.
