



Press Release

July 2025

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa commemorates Rheumatic Fever Week

Rheumatic Fever Week (RFW) is an annual campaign commemorated from the 1st - 7th August, to raise awareness about Acute Rheumatic Fever (ARF). The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA), together with our continental colleagues in Africa, aim to raise awareness that if RF is left untreated the condition can progress into Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) which can be fatal. The Foundation's primary mission is to reduce the burden of heart disease in South Africa, with RHD falling within the broader category of cardiac conditions. Prof Naidoo, CEO of the HSFSA states that in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) RHD is still a burden. In South Africa, we are still confronting this condition which is mostly eradicated in Western countries.

Elizabeth Gatumia, CEO and Founder of the Kenyan-Heart National Foundation believes that it's time to eradicate RHD in Kenya and in Africa and urges all of us to advocate for prompt and correct treatment of "a strep-sore-throat".

RHD remains a disease of poverty, disproportionately affecting LMICs and marginalized populations in high-income countries. Effective prevention and management of RHD require addressing the root causes of poverty, such as overcrowding, limited access to clean water and sanitation, and healthcare disparities. Ensuring adequate living conditions, equitable access to quality healthcare services, and implementing comprehensive prevention, screening, diagnosis, and treatment programs are essential to reducing the burden of RHD in vulnerable populations.

Gerhard De Koe, Founder and CEO of the Namibia Heart Foundation states that healthy hearts start with early treatment and awareness and as such, we need to stop throat infections in its tracks and prevent rheumatic fever.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), rheumatic fever is an illness where the body's immune system overreacts to a throat or skin infection caused by *Streptococcus pyogenes* bacteria (Group A strep). This autoimmune inflammatory response can affect multiple organs including the heart, joints, and sometimes the skin and brain. This presentation is often seen between 10 to 21 days after the initial throat infection. RHD develops when repeated episodes of ARF occur, causing damage and scarring to heart valves and heart muscle.

According to the WHO's (2023) technical brief on rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease, RHD affected an estimated 55 million people globally and caused 360,000

deaths in 2021. The WHO noted that the first episode of ARF is most commonly observed in children aged 5 to 14 years, followed by recurring infections within one year of the initial episode. These recurrences can persist throughout a person's life. The WHO also states that RHD typically begins in childhood, with the highest prevalence found in young adults aged 20 to 39 years. The report further highlighted that, internationally, women have a higher prevalence of RHD.

In the most recent National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) GERMS-SA quarterly surveillance report (2025, June 30), an average of 824 cases of Group A Streptococcus infections were identified per year from 2021 to 2024 in South Africa. This figure may not accurately reflect the current situation in South Africa, as numerous cases remain undetected, undiagnosed, and uninvestigated. The RFW campaign aims to teach people about the dangers of ignoring or not treating throat infections caused by Group A Streptococcus. Rheumatic fever can be fully prevented using one of the oldest antibiotics—penicillin.

When rheumatic fever is diagnosed early, treatment can stop it from worsening. Doctors can give antibiotics to treat the infection and medicine to reduce pain and swelling. Regular check-ups and penicillin injections help prevent more attacks and protect the heart. Prevention strategies are essential to reduce the return and spread of the infection. These include better hygiene, staying isolated when sick, improving living conditions, and increasing access to primary healthcare. Because RF can cause RHD through repeated episodes, ongoing community prevention is strongly advised. RHD is a serious heart condition that can lead to death or lifelong disability. It requires lifelong medication, regular medical check-ups, and often heart valve surgery.

RHD often damages the heart valves and surgical intervention is the primary treatment for replacing or repairing the damaged valve(s). Evidence from tertiary centers in South Africa, such as Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, suggests that early intervention can significantly improve outcomes for patients with RHD. However, in some LMICs, cardiac surgery facilities are often scarce, and long waiting periods can limit access to life-saving interventions, such as heart valve surgery. Necessary steps to improve specialized services at healthcare facilities to improve health outcomes for individuals living with RHD who require heart surgery. If the disease has become severe, the individual may also need to be treated for heart failure or an irregular heart rhythm. RHD can be prevented if ARF is treated promptly with the correct antibiotics, regular check-ups and prevention strategies are in place.

The HSFSA drives the campaign annually, disseminating information and raising awareness about the relationship between RF and RHD. The Foundation urges parents and care-givers to be more vigilant and work towards reducing RHD burden. Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Foundation states that “Parents and care-givers are to please take the responsibility to ensure that their child receives medical care, particularly for very high fever and a fever that does not settle”.

For media enquiries, please contact Themba Mzondi, PR and Communications Officer on 021 422 1586 / 078 113 5216 or email: themba.mzondi@heartfoundation.co.za. Media engagements will be carried out by the CEO, Health Promotion Officers and Allied Health Care staff, such as Dietitians.

About the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) plays a leading role in the fight against preventable heart disease and stroke, with the aim of seeing fewer people in South Africa suffer premature deaths and disabilities. The HSFSA, established in 1980 is a non-governmental, non-profit organization which relies on external funding to sustain the work it carries out.

The HSFSA aims to reduce the cardiovascular disease (CVD) burden in South Africa and ultimately on the health care system of South Africa. Our mission is to empower people in South Africa to adopt healthy behaviours, make healthy choices easier, seek appropriate care and encourage prevention.

For more information visit www.heartfoundation.co.za. You can also find us on www.facebook.com/HeartStrokeSA and www.twitter.com/SAHeartStroke

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