

TRENDS IN MORTALITY FROM NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1997-2005.

Until 1994, South Africa experienced institutionalized apartheid during which period, access to basic social services including health care was racially discriminatory. According to the American Association of the Advancement of Science, the apartheid policies of the South African government had a deleterious effect on the health of the majority of South Africans. Since the South Africa health systems were divided according to race, geographic area, the public sector and the private sector, inequalities in the provision of health care emerged between blacks and whites, between rural and urban areas, between primary and tertiary health care programmes and between the homelands and the rest of South Africa. Following the demise of apartheid in 1994, post-apartheid Governments in South Africa through various policies and strategies have committed themselves to redressing past inequalities in access to basic social services due to apartheid.

Despite apartheid policies, mortality in South Africa declined steeply in the 1980s levelling off in the 1990s. However, since the late 1990s, there has been a steady increase in mortality in South Africa which became quite substantial after 2001 such that life expectancy at birth in 2006 was lower than the level in the 1980s and 1990s. The increase in mortality in recent years is partly attributable to AIDS as South Africa is one of the countries worst affected by HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and in the world. Although HIV prevalence among pregnant women in South Africa has declined in the past two successive years, HIV prevalence among pregnant women estimated as 28% in 2007 is about the second highest compared to other countries in the world.

While communicable diseases will continue to play a key role in the overall mortality of South Africa, non-communicable diseases would probably become increasingly important as Governments' efforts to redress past racial inequalities in access to basic social services and reduce poverty related mortality among other measures yields fruits.

Death records constitute a useful source of data for monitoring trends in mortality due to various causes. The existence of vital registration in South Africa dates back to 1910 though was not uniform throughout the country until 1924. Using death registrations data, this study examines trends in mortality from non-communicable diseases in South Africa. Since one of the problems in the use of vital registration data is incomplete coverage, this study first assesses the completeness of death registrations in South Africa as a rough indicator for assessing the level of under registration of non-communicable diseases in the country. Next, it examines trends in the relative contribution of non-communicable diseases to overall mortality in South Africa. Lastly, it discusses the public health policy implications of the results for South Africa.