**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**COMMITTEE ON HEALTH HEARS FROM MINISTER MKHIZE ABOUT SUSPENSION OF DISTRIBUTION  OF ASTRAZENECA VACCINE**

**Parliament, Thursday, 11 February  2021** – The Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, told Members of his committee today that since the news broke on the lack of the desired efficacy of AstraZeneca’s vaccine against the 501Y. V2 variant dominant in South Africa, there has been a lot of confusion and indiscriminate panic about the universal safety and efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines.

He said yesterday’s briefing meeting by Minister Dr Zweli Mkhize was convened against that background to afford Members of the committee first-hand information from the Department of Health on the matter. As such, he said: “It is ideal that we afford the department an opportunity to update us on the new development related to the efficacy of AstraZeneca, what will be done with it, what interventions the department will implement to mitigate any adverse effects, public panic or growing mistrust of all vaccines?”

Briefing the committee, Dr Zweli Mkhize said concerns about the efficacy of AstraZeneca have scuppered the rollout plans of the department. He reiterated to the committee that yes, the news about the efficacy of AstraZeneca affected the rollout plans. “And as government we are disappointed by these developments. But we have new rollout plans in place to ensure that vaccines are dispensed to save lives,”  he said.

To allay people’s fears, Dr Mkhize reassured the committee that the research results that have been reported in the media do not mean that AstraZeneca is dangerous, but it is just that it is not responsive to our variant. “Before the emergence of our variant, AstraZeneca had around 75% to 77% efficacy rate,”  he added.

He further stated that the South African results of the efficacy of AstraZeneca were still outstanding when the results of its efficacy to South African variant emerged in the media. “Our scientists have done their research studies and were ready to disclose them, but were still tied up by research protocol involved to ensure that their findings were peer reviewed before they could make them public,” he said.

The committee wanted to know how this happened. Dr Mkhize replied: “When we procured AstraZeneca, we procured it on the basis of the universal variant that was in place at the time. And it showed positive results, hence other countries have ordered it for use. Our variant emerged thereafter, at the time the manufacturing of the vaccine was designed accordingly and procurement thereof was done before the variant emerged.”

On what will be done with AstraZeneca, he responded: “Our scientists will do their own study to determine how we will deal with it. But we have officially suspended the distribution of this vaccine for now until a scientific determination is made.”

Members wanted to know, given the recent revelations, what is the department’s intervention? The Minister replied: “We have spoken to Johnson & Johnson, whose vaccine has a 57% efficacy rate to our variant, to afford us a bridging stock that was part of their research trials in order for us to be able to dispense doses to the frontline staff.”

He added: “Johnson & Johnson has assured us that they will afford us those supplies on top of the orders we have placed with them. And we will adjust our rollout plans on receipt of these doses. We will be able to announce the new vaccine rollout plans when we have secured our supplies,” said the Minister.

**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, DR SIBONGISENI DHLOMO.**