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## PAEDIATRIC SOCIETY OF GHANA

### **COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE 2023 ANNUAL GENERAL AND SCIENTIFIC MEETING (AGSM) OF THE PAEDIATRIC SOCIETY OF GHANA (PSG) ON THE THEME “ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND CHILDREN’S WELL BEING: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY”**

The Paediatric Society of Ghana, comprising Paediatricians, nurses and child health advocates in the country, held its AGSM from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 2023 at the Golden Bean Hotel, Kumasi and issues this communique after extensive deliberations. The theme of the AGSM “Environmental Health and Children’s Well Being: A shared Responsibility”, underscores the increasing importance and contribution of environmental factors to childhood morbidity/mortality and the importance of collaboration among all stakeholders to curb its impact.

It has become abundantly clear, through the concept of One Health, that the health of human and animal populations are inseparable from the health of the environment in which they live. Children are vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation by virtue of their small size, immature immune system and their rapid growth and development. The impact of environmental degradation, air pollution and climate change on children are numerous and include the following:

- Air pollution resulting from rapid urbanization, heavy vehicular traffic, factories, dusty, unpaved roads, improper waste disposal, bush fires and use of fossils for cooking leads to continuous exposure to pollutants that is increasing the occurrence of respiratory diseases and worsening the conditions of children with existing respiratory diseases like asthma. The effects of air pollution extend to pregnant women and their unborn babies and are especially dire for growing children with children under 5 years suffering the most premature deaths due to air pollution. These statistics are particularly disturbing for us in view of findings that among the 10 most populated cities in Africa,

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Accra had the second highest levels of PM<sub>2.5</sub> (minute particulate matter in air from combustion, organic matter and metals) in 2019. Pollution and its effects can reduce GDP by as much as a 6.5%.

- Pollution and environmental degradation are leading to disruption of food chains, loss of fertile farm lands thus causing food insecurity and the severest forms of malnutrition among children, severe wasting. There has been an increase in the number of people unable to afford a healthy diet around the world from 112 million to 3.1 billion. By 2050, if steps are not taken, hunger and malnutrition could rise 20% globally with a majority of childhood deaths expected to be driven by undernutrition.
- According to the WHO between 2030 to 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress. Climate change has been identified as the greatest global health challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, threatening human health and development. According to the 2019 Lancet report on countdown on health and climate change “The life of every child born today will be profoundly affected by climate change without accelerated intervention, this new era will come to define the health of people at every stage of their lives.”
- Exposure to chemicals such as lead, mercury, arsenic and other heavy metals from inappropriate disposal of wastes and the “Galamsey” menace are contributing to deaths among children as well as cognitive deficits which affects their school performance and suspected to cause congenital malformations in children.
- Repeated exposure to noise from vehicles, machinery, blasts from quarries, loud music, video games are resulting in increasing levels of hearing impairment in children with dire consequences for their overall development including delayed language acquisition, poor speech development, poor educational achievement and poor quality of life generally.

## Birth Asphyxia and other important deliberations

Birth asphyxia is noted to still contribute significantly to the country’s high neonatal mortality rate. We note that with strict implementation of already existing measures such as the presence of skilled personnel at delivery, adequate staffing of labour wards and neonatal units, provision of functional equipment for resuscitation of babies in the first minute of life using protocols like helping babies

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breathe and facilitation of safe transport for the few babies needing referral to higher facilities, many deaths can be averted and neurological impairment mitigated. All babies born should be given a chance to survive in the first few minutes following birth and it should not matter where a child is born, all health facilities should be ready to receive and resuscitate neonates. Availability of functional resuscitation equipment and appropriate resuscitation in the first minute of life increases the odds of survival.

The increasing importance of sudden cardiac arrest in school children and other children engaged in sports was underscored at our preconference. With adequate training and preparedness to perform CPR and access to defibrillators most of these deaths can be averted.

In light of the above the PSG will like to state the following and make these recommendations:

- We reiterate the UN convention on the rights of the child, Article 24, which stipulates that “children have the right to the best healthcare possible, clean water to drink, healthy food and a clean and safe environment to live in”.
- Government and all stakeholders must as a matter of urgency take steps to reduce air pollution and strive towards attaining the WHO target of 5 mcg/m<sup>3</sup> of PM<sub>2.5</sub>. Locally relevant research is urgently needed in the area of air pollution and its effect on children. While awaiting conduct of these studies work must commence to improve public transport, reduce dust from our roads and require that planning of urban areas should incorporate pollution prevention. Reduction in exposure of children to air pollutants is necessary at home, at schools, and in the general environment.
- The PSG adds its voice to the numerous calls to curb the galamsey menace that is destroying our forests, land, water bodies and contributing significantly to deaths of children exposed to chemicals used in mining, falling into abandoned mine pits among others. This canker must not be allowed to

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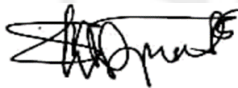
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fester or we will have ourselves to blame and posterity will not forgive us. Time is running out, we must act now, and we must act together in a concerted manner. Half-hearted solutions will certainly fail.

In conclusion we would like to point out that time is not on our side, we must act now, and we must act together.

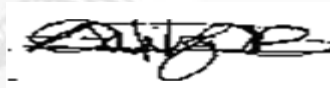
Thank You.

Sincerely,



**Dr. John Adabie Appiah**

**President, Paediatric Society of Ghana**



**Dr. Angela Osei-Bonsu**

**General Secretary, Paediatric society of Ghana**

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