

Remarks of the Minister of Health
Honourable Dr. Hetherwick Ntaba
On the Occasion of
The Ground Breaking Ceremony
Of the Children's Clinical Centre of Excellence
Kamuzu Central Hospital
Lilongwe
June 13th, 2005

Good morning and welcome. May I offer a special and most warm welcome to our distinguished visitors who have traveled from afar to be with us today at this simple yet very meaningful ceremony. May your stay among us be as rewarding for you as it most certainly will be for us.

Ladies and gentlemen, while most of us have learned to live with pain and suffering in the course of our professional and other lives, there is something that rebels in us when we see children suffer. It really is not the way it is supposed to be. There is something unfair and unjust about it. And of course it grieves me both as a Minister of Health and a father, to say that mere feelings are all part of natural human instincts. Under parental imperatives for the propagation of the human race there is much more than our fair share of pain among too many of our Malawian children. This is why I have enormous satisfaction in being here today. We are about to address one of the most traumatic of all illnesses in children, namely HIV/AIDS related illnesses. We doing it with speed and we are doing it with colleagues who have made Malawi's pain, their own pain. Simon and Garfunkel, if you are old enough to remember their song "Sounds of Silence" would today have sung about silent cries of pain among these children. Ladies and gentlemen, in spite of truly enormous national effort, the HIV/AIDS epidemic rages on. There are now close to 1 million adults and children with HIV in Malawi and every

year approximately 110,000 new infections add onto the pool among young people 15-24 years.

The effect of the epidemic particularly on children has been quite devastating. About 11% of the nations' children under 15 have lost one or both parents. There are 110,000 orphans under the age of 5, and 340,000 aged 5-9 years old. Our latest data indicate that we have approximately 70,000 cases of pediatric HIV.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to assure you that even though the proposed dedicated Pediatric HIV/AIDS Clinic will be a major and most welcome weapon in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the Ministry's major focus will be preventing mother-to-child transmission, which is as you might expect, the largest source of HIV infection in children under the age of 15. As you are aware, the risk of a baby acquiring the virus from an infected mother ranges from 15-25% in industrialized countries and 25-35% in developing countries like Malawi, with the differences more than likely attributable to feeding practices, antiretroviral therapies and quality of obstetrical care.

Having said that, I cannot possibly over-emphasize the significance of today's ceremony. The country is already reeling under the weight of an epidemic that takes the lives of 10 people every hour of every day, and we lack the resources to deal adequately with it. When it comes to the complexity of treating HIV infected children, there we have a problem, which I am sure Dr. Kazembe and many others can attest to. We simply do not have the capacity to cope. The figures show that out of the 70,000 cases of paediatric AIDS, only an estimated 600 are on ARV treatment. Need I say more. I really don't think so.

Now ladies and gentlemen, you can or should truly see the full meaning of today's ceremony. Distinguished guests from the Abbott Fund, Baylor College of Medicine, the University of North Carolina on behalf of government, the Ministry, and especially our Malawian children, the most innocent and tragic victims of the epidemic, I offer you my most sincere gratitude; I ask you to double your efforts with other institutions in the U.S.A. I look forward to the day and the hour when I will be able to officially open Malawi's first-ever dedicated Paediatric HIV/AIDS Clinic.

I thank you and may god bless you all.