

# Summit tackles dumped baby crisis

## 'Desperate teens have nowhere to turn to'

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Political Writer

TEEN-FRIENDLY clinics have been proposed as a way to stop the scourge of child abandonment in the Western Cape.

School teachers, church leaders and NGOs have called on the provincial government to open centres to which teenagers could go for help and support instead of abandoning or murdering their newborn babies.

The proposal was mooted at an emergency summit yesterday on child abandonment.

The idea is to open teen medical facilities, similar to clinics, where teenagers can receive help and support during pregnancy and get advice on abortion or foster care.

The centres should provide workshops on parenting skills, counselling and contraceptives, say NGOs.

Emerentia van Wyk, a teacher at a Strand high school, said teenagers were too embarrassed to go to "normal" clinics and day hospitals for help.

"The girls are overwhelmed by the pregnancy. They feel they can't speak to anyone and are isolated and abandoned themselves," said Van Wyk.

"They need a special teen-friendly clinic they can go to for help.

"In most cases, they are abandoned by their parents, families and the baby's father."

The summit was convened by Social Development MEC Patricia de Lille after four babies had been found dumped in the province in a month.

"This is a crisis, an emergency - we have to address it," said De Lille.

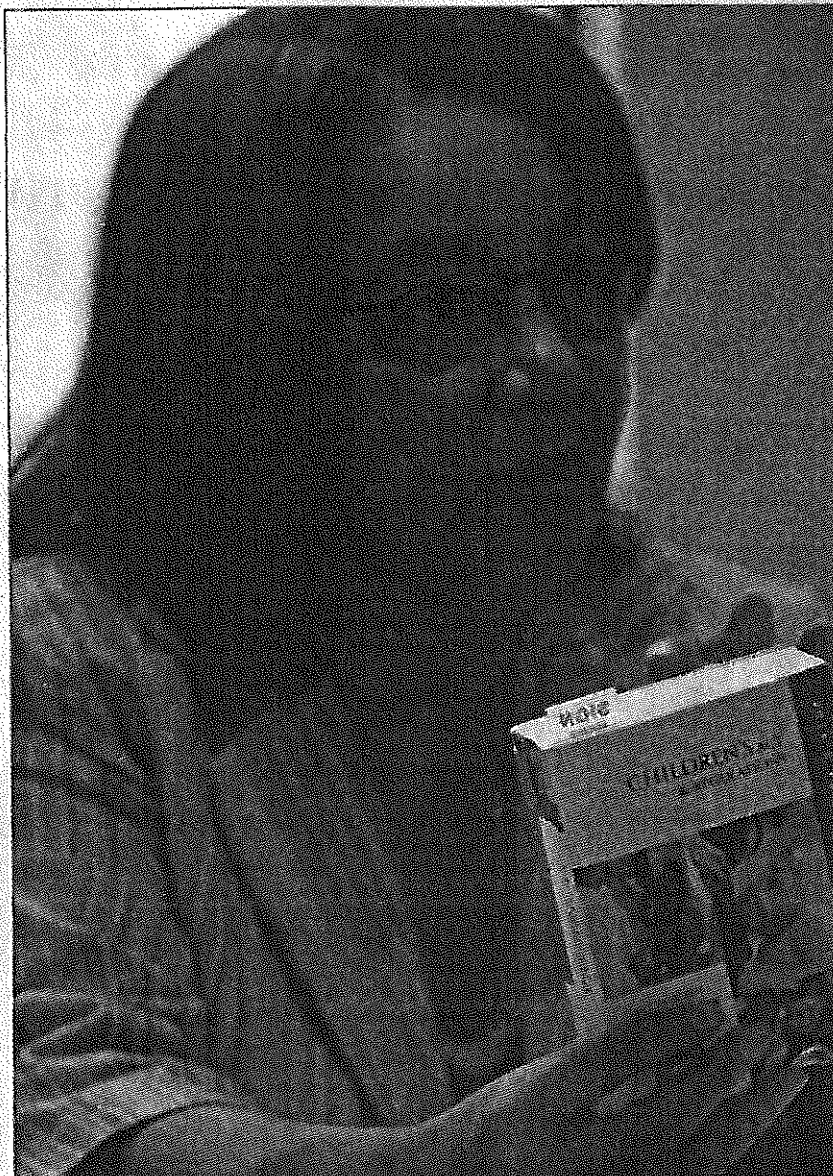
"The reason for this summit is to get a process started. We need to assist these young girls, but also hold the fathers accountable. The fathers can't just impregnate the girls and disappear. We need to look at ways of getting them more involved."

More than 500 babies have been abandoned this year.

Premier Helen Zille, who attended yesterday's summit, said child abandonment was a "crisis" that was particularly affecting the Western Cape.

"The dumping of babies and young children is a chilling reality," she said. "But we cannot simply condemn the mothers - these things are complex."

Zille urged teenagers to abstain from sex. "If you are not prepared to be a responsi-



**TAKING ACTION:** Social Development MEC Patricia de Lille says the dumping of babies in the Western Cape is an emergency.  
PICTURES: JASON BOUD

ble parent, don't make a baby."

The provincial government and Department of Social Development would campaign to stop child abandonment during the 16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women and Children later this month, Zille said.

"Our biggest challenge is men who make young girls

pregnant and walk away from their responsibility. This has to stop."

About 80 percent of infants in children's homes in the Western Cape have been abandoned. Only nine percent of children in these homes were orphans, said Dr Michelle Meiring, acting chief executive of the children's organisation

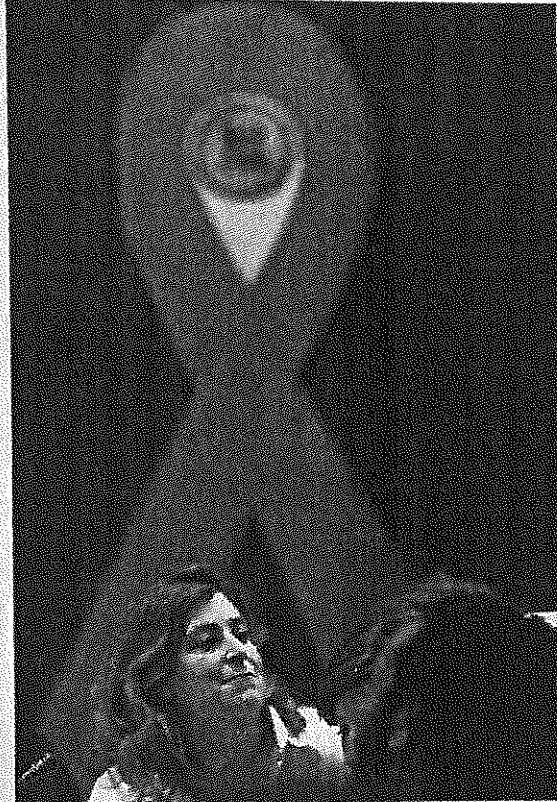
the Big Shoes Foundation.

She said child abandonment, especially among teenagers, was South Africa's newest silent epidemic.

"Fuelling this epidemic is HIV/Aids," said Meiring.

"Fifteen percent of abandoned children (have) HIV-positive mothers."

Young mothers were desper-



**ROCKING THE CRADLE:** Dr Simone Honikman, director of the Perinatal Mental Health Project at UCT's Department of Psychiatry, says the incidence of infanticide and child abandonment is grossly underestimated in the province.

ate for help and often learnt during unplanned pregnancies that they were HIV-positive.

"This is another main contributor to babies being abandoned shortly after birth, or in extreme cases murdered and dumped," Meiring said.

Dr Simone Honikman, director of the Perinatal Mental Health Project at UCT's Department of Psychiatry, said the incidence of infanticide and child abandonment was grossly underestimated.

Depression and anxiety often led to child abandonment.

"Mental illness impacts on their thoughts and behaviour. These women and girls need treatment, not punishment."

Honikman said one in three women experienced depression during and after pregnancy.

"We shouldn't miss the warning signs when the girls

and young women come to our health facilities. We need dedicated counsellors at our obstetric centres."

Other resolutions from the summit included:

- Putting together a task team to monitor and research the problem.

- Devising a strategy to fight the scourge, which would include a plan to tackle teen alcohol and drug abuse.

- Identifying where red tape prevented service provision.

- Training police and law enforcement officers in resuscitating babies.

De Lille said her department would consider the recommendations and proposals. She would present the list to the provincial cabinet "for action" next week, then "give feedback to this forum".

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