



Response

December 6th, 2018

International World Aids Day 2018

On 1st December South Africa observed the 30th Annual World Aids Day. This year the theme was 'Know your Status.' This is an important consideration as it is estimated that about 9.4 million people living with HIV/Aids worldwide do not know their status.¹ On the other hand, positively, statistics show that 75% do know it, equating to 19m people, compared to 67% in 2015.² It has also been noted that worldwide 21.7m people have access to ARV therapy.³ While it has claimed repeatedly that through the various Government run programs the pandemic has been brought under some measure of control, there are still about 1000 new HIV infections per day in South Africa.⁴ Of particular concern is that there has been an increase in the number of infections amongst youth in age group of 15-24 years.⁵ Young women in this category made up 37% of all new infections across the age-groups.⁶ The National Strategic Plan 2017-2022 points to poverty, the low status of women, gender based violence, intergenerational relationships, and fewer employment opportunities as reasons for this disparity.

It is estimated that between 20-25% of new infections result from gender-based violence.⁷ Indeed, it should be noted that World Aids Day falls within the '16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children.' In 2016 the government initiated the 'She Conquers' campaign, stressing the need for keeping girl children in school, creating work opportunities for young women, and preventing gender based violence. It is too early to assess the outcome of this campaign.

The 2017 statistics show that 7.9m people live with HIV in South Africa;⁸ 61%, or 4.4m people, are on ARV treatment, and 58% of the approximately 280 000 children living with HIV are on such treatment. There has been a decline in the number of new infections amongst children. One very positive development in South Africa has been the reduction of mother-to-child transmissions, which have gone from 3.6% in 2011 to 1.3% in 2017.⁹ Prof Glenda Gray, President of the South African Medical Research Council, pointed out that the national program was successful, and had prevented transmission at 6 weeks and 18 months post-delivery. This has led to a sharpening of policy and the national Department of Health has now introduced repeat HIV testing mothers and more frequent testing for infants.¹⁰ This will obviously cement the successes in this field.

In 2017 about 110 000 people died of Aids-related illnesses. Since records have been kept of this category of fatalities, 2m children have died from similar causes.¹¹ Life expectancy has however increased from 61.2 years in 2010 to 67.7 years in 2017.¹²

Of particular interest in this year's assessment are the encouraging results in the 90-90-90 program or targets. This program seeks, firstly, to have 90% of people living with HIV tested – South Africa has to date virtually achieved this target.¹³ The second target is to put 90% of those infected on anti-retroviral treatment – SA has the largest anti-retroviral treatment program in the world, with 61%

receiving treatment. The third target is that 90% of those on treatment are virally suppressed – the figure currently stands at 86%.

But despite the gains of the past few years, SA is far from having conquered the pandemic. There is a continual challenge of embedding this struggle in a human rights narrative, especially in its inclusion of marginal groups and their unequal access to treatment. These issues are understood as rights. There is also the constant difficulty in financially constrained times that the necessary monetary support for programs in this sector, and for the work of civil society groups, will diminish. More ongoing education is needed, as is an ethic of responsibility and respect in relationships among the youth. Recent studies have shown that only 59% of children have a comprehensive knowledge on the subject and on how to avoid infection.¹⁴ All of these must continue to be foregrounded.

Finally, it is worth recalling these words of Pope Francis on HIV/Aids: “All advances in pharmacology, treatment, and research [must] be matched by a firm commitment to promote the integral development of each person as a beloved child of God.”¹⁵

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¹ <https://www.today.ng/news/nigeria/report-9-4-people-living-hiv-unaware-173170>

² <http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/75-of-all-people-living-with-hiv-know-their-hiv-status-new-unaid-report/>

³ <http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/75-of-all-people-living-with-hiv-know-their-hiv-status-new-unaid-report/>

⁴ Cape Times. 3.12.2018 p2.

⁵ <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/news/motsaledi-pleads-for-greater-hiv-awareness-in-schools-16118906>

⁶ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

⁷ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

⁸ Cape Times. 3.12.2018 p2.

⁹ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

¹⁰ Cape Times. 3.12.2018 p2

¹¹ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

¹² <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

¹³ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

¹⁴ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

¹⁵ <https://www.caritas.org/2015/07/pope-francis-promotes-hivaids-treatment/>