



ALARMING INFECTION RATE
Statistics show 1200 girls between the ages of 15 and 24 are infected with HIV every week in South Africa. According to the Higher Education and Training HIV/Aids Programme (HEAIDS), although the infection rate had dropped from 2000 per week three years ago, the figures still remained unacceptably high. | IOL

ECHO has put contraception back on the agenda. It has reinforced the fact that that women are exposed to high levels of sexually transmitted infections

HELEN REES
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■ DISEASE

Renewed hope in fighting HIV



A DOCTOR draws blood from a man to check for HIV/Aids at a mobile testing unit in Ndeeba, a suburb in Uganda's capital, Kampala. | REUTERS



PROFESSOR Refilwe Phaswana-Mafuya, chairperson of the 19th SA Aids Conference in Durban. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)

MSF community-based project in KZN achieved UNAIDS targets

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THE results of a survey by the international medical humanitarian organisation, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), has renewed hope that it is possible to reach the UNAIDS targets of 90-90-90 – described as among the best news to come out of this year's South African Aids Conference.

In a South African first, the MSF's community-based HIV/TB project in Eshowe, KZN achieved the UNAIDS targets of 90-90-90. The area has one of the highest HIV rates in the country, with one in four people living with HIV.

The results of a 2018 survey of over 3000 people indicate that 90% of people living with HIV in the area know their status, 94% are on antiretroviral treatment and 95% had a suppressed viral load.

These encouraging results – presented at this year's 19th South African Aids Conference that took place in Durban this week – were met with jubilation by delegates. UNAIDS has set the deadline of 2020 to achieve the target.

Ellie Ford Kamara, project coordinator in Eshowe, credited the amazing results to a collective effort of MSF working with local civil society, patient groups and traditional leaders, among others.

As experts, they did not impose the programme on the community, but rather worked alongside the community to get the buy-in.

"When we began in 2011 in uMlalazi Municipality in the King Cetshwayo District, we engaged heavily with the local community. This, I think, is one of the magic keys to this success," said Kamara.

The start of the project was

rocky, but over time the community began to warm up and embraced it, Kamara revealed.

"We extensively engaged the community, the leaders and traditional health practitioners through imbizos and also organised community advisory boards.

"We employed a lot of community health workers – at one stage, by the end of 2015, we had 86 community health agents who were going door-

to-door providing HIV counselling and testing and health promotions," she said.

Kamara said these successful results indicated the importance of solid partnerships, and when those were in place, possibilities were endless.

"This has been a collective effort, we haven't done this in isolation, we have been working very closely with the Department of Health.

"This success is not that of MSF, but

of the department and the patients," she said.

Some of the key findings of the survey include the 14% increase in the overall HIV status awareness, while those initiated on antiretroviral therapy treatment increased by 24% between 2013 and 2018.

The survey also found that the proportion of people living with HIV who were virally suppressed increased from 56% in 2013 to 84% in 2018.

■ HEALTH

OLIVER METH

Declaration against HIV adopted

THE eThekweni Declaration was adopted at the ninth South African Aids Conference that concluded in Durban on Friday.

A number of commitments were agreed to by the government, scientists and civil society.

Among the resolutions adopted were the development of programmes to encourage the active participation of youth in the HIV response, investment in research, addressing inequalities, particularly those based on gender and empowering young women and girls.

According to Doctors Without Borders, the incidence of HIV has decreased among women aged 15 to 29 from 2.9% to 1.2%, but the figure remained high and pointed to the continued risk faced by adolescent girls and young women.

The declaration set out to put young people at the centre of the fight against the HIV epidemic.

Deputy President David Mabuza, who also serves as South African National Aids Council (Sanac) chairman, accepted the declaration handed over to him at the closing plenary.

"There is again a need to revive the sense of urgency, political will, compassion, transparency and accountability towards reinvigoration of the HIV response," read the declaration.

Conference chairperson Professor Refilwe Phaswana-Mafuya said the Fourth Industrial Revolution and innovative interventions needed to be embraced as a means of stopping the spread of HIV.

Phaswana-Mafuya said: "Instead

of having young people at a physical location, you can virtually connect with them. This is one of the pivotal innovations that could help, given the magnitude of the epidemic among youth, which is rising.

"We want to strengthen political will. We want to remove any sense of complacency that might be there. We want to strengthen our health information system and put young people at the centre of the epidemic and reduce the number of new infections."

While the incidence of HIV in SA was declining, new infections among the youth, particularly adolescent girls and young women, remained high.

It was confirmed at the conference that about 7.9 million people in South Africa were living with HIV and more

than 4.4 million were on treatment.

Caprisa's Professor Salim Abdool Karim added that the fight against the epidemic was far from over because more than 5 000 new infections were contracted around the world daily.

During the closing plenary session, Mabuza reiterated the government's commitment to the fight against HIV.

He said: "As government we are ready and willing to hold hands with you, walk every mile with you until our total victory over HIV."

He said 2 million more people needed to be initiated on ARVs and that the country was not doing enough to prevent new infections.

"What's clear is that we are not doing well on preventing new HIV infections. The gap is too big and we

must close it."

He added that stigma and discrimination were preventing South Africans from reaching their targets.

A number of commitments were made to support unprecedented innovations, technologies and strategies to control the epidemic as the country moved into the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

It was also confirmed that:

- ◆ progress towards the 2030 global epidemic control targets was not adequate.
- ◆ key population and vulnerable groups remained under-diagnosed and under-treated, with higher mortality and morbidity rates.
- ◆ the health system was overburdened, resulting in service delivery challenges.

The four-day conference was attended by more than 3 000 delegates from across the world.