

# Time to talk about HIV in our personal relationships

By CAROLE AGUDAH-MANDI

**V**ery few things have affected human relationships the way the Aids epidemic has. Aids not only raises questions about the moral fibre of our society, it has deep implications on our interpersonal relationships.

Aids doesn't just affect the infected person but almost everybody the victim relates to. As someone said, "you can't look Aids in the face and just walk away." It touches something deep inside each of us, perhaps because it reminds us of our own mortality.

Have you ever been required to go for an Aids test by the company you work by an insurance firm before you could buy a policy? Remember the feelings of apprehension and fear that filled you as you waited for the results?

Let's assume your worst fears are confirmed and the results positive.

Probably feeling as if a death sentence has been handed down on you, you stagger out of the clinic confused and dazed by fright.

Thoughts of how numbered your days must be stinging your mind. Then the big question: Do you tell those closest to you or will you just wait for death and carry on as if nothing happened?

The alarming rate at which Aids is spreading implies that many infected persons prefer to live in denial, continuing with their lives as if this was just a

bad dream now over. These people are a danger not just to themselves but to those they live with too because they can infect their unsuspecting family, relatives, friends and even strangers.

Last year, *The Daily Mail* carried a story about a Cypriot man who knowingly infected a British holidaymaker with Aids. The story related how this healthy and handsome-looking man's wife ailed and eventually died of Aids but he continued to prey on women visiting the beaches. When the British woman discovered she was infected, she took the man to court. He was jailed for two years. Unfortunately for the woman, she didn't have two years. She succumbed to the disease while her killer lived — in prison.

Many HIV carriers do infect someone before they know they are positive, but it's the

callous few who know and spread it anyway that worry us all.

Regardless of the rationale behind such cruel behaviour, the person who wilfully spreads the virus is no less guilty than one who hacks another to death with an axe.

But since no HIV carrier wears inscriptions on their foreheads, and the law will have an impossible mission prosecuting everyone who spreads the virus, the responsibility of protecting oneself rests primarily with the individual.

That's what safer sex is all about. Safer sex goes beyond the use of condoms and requires individuals to be accountable to themselves and others. The following sad but true accounts are proof that what anyone does with his or her body just doesn't end with that person. The story lives after the bodies are buried. Names have been changed to protect identities of those involved.

Margaret tried her best to be a good wife, as anyone who knew her would have told you. She was faithful to her marital vows.

Unfortunately, her husband's philandering ways soon had very grave consequences for both of them. They had been married for 15 years when he fell ill. He was admitted to hospital and it was only then that Margaret learnt he carried the Aids virus.

*The days when spouses weren't overly concerned about their partner's extra-marital exploits are long gone.*



Aids patients at a clinic in rural Zambia (top) and people enjoying themselves with abandon in a bar (left). Despite the fact that the disease continues to claim thousands of lives, most families still prefer not to talk about it — *File Picture*

This should bring about a situation where people are honest about their past sexual conduct. If you are aware that a partner somewhere along the line died from the disease, find out your status and allay any fears. Today, more than ever, it is useful to keep a close tab on past as well as present relationships.

Many people shy away from asking their partners about previous relationships. "It has nothing to do with me," one woman told me. Well, it soon will if he is carrying the virus or any other STD. One ad puts it bluntly: "When you sleep with someone, you sleep with all their previous partners as well." You have a right to know where they have been.

Now more than ever, we can't afford to ignore issues on the pretext that sex is not discussed in our culture. One man told me he would consider it an affront if his wife asked him where he had spent the night because culturally it is not the correct thing to ask. But these are not the dark ages when relationships were shrouded in secrecy.

The days when spouses weren't overly concerned about their partners' extra-marital affairs are long gone. "As long as he provides for us, I don't care what he does," women would say. But now more and more women are beginning to care, especially when their husbands might come home with more than just the paycheck.

Safer sex begins with talking about it and discarding ignorant and harmful myths and practices. The onus to protect oneself is on the individual.

"If you suspect that your partner is cheating on you, you must insist he/she wears a condom," says Juliet, 28. But how possible is this in real life?

"It's very difficult for a woman to insist that her husband uses a condom. I think many men become angry even if they know that they have been careless," says Irene, 38. "I'm not going to just sit here and wait for him to bring me some strange disease," protests Christine, 26.

Parents should educate children on safer sex by instilling a sense of personal responsibility. They need to stop preaching water and drinking wine. Statistics from teenage pregnancies prove that the youth are becoming sexually active at an earlier age. It's time to stop burying our heads in the sand.

Shocked was Margaret and devastated too to know that he had been diagnosed with the virus several years earlier but never told her.

He never recovered.

After the burial, she reluctantly went for a test which confirmed her worst fears. Positive. Margaret died two years later, leaving her three school-going children in the care of relatives.

Pauline's husband died from an Aids-related condition. She comes from a community which strongly believes in witchcraft and they explained away her husband's death this way: "He was bewitched by people who envied his success."

Pauline has adamantly refused to go for a test although she is known to frequent bars and lodgings with a new 'boyfriend' each night.

Jane was only in her early twenties when she died. It is said by her friends that just before she succumbed, she called all the men she had been intimate with and told them it was in their best interests to go for an Aids test. She died a vengeful and bitter woman having made good on her vow to pass on the virus to any man she encountered because, as she told her friends, "some man gave it to me."

Most of us are familiar with stories of people who knowingly pass on the Aids virus. In fact, for many of us, Aids now has a familiar face. It has touched

people we know and for others it has hit even closer home.

Researchers estimate 40 million people will be infected with the virus by the turn of the century. What is confounding is that even with these statistics at our fingertips, many Kenyans still adamantly refuse to change irresponsible habits.

Heralded as the saviour of a sexually active generation, condom sales are soaring. The message has been: "It doesn't matter what you do or with whom but please protect yourself with a condom."

Although condoms do help, using them is not a guarantee you are safe. They have been known to break and using them requires a strong discipline in knowledge and morals too. More stringent measures have to be taken.

The condoms' effectiveness is reduced when they are not used properly or consistently used, that is choosing not to wear them with some partners. Safe sex is no longer very safe.

Safer sex, on the other hand, simply means practising responsible sexual habits. The law holds us responsible for any activities that endanger another life but because of the deadly consequences of Aids, we need to go a step further and be accountable for what we do with our bodies and with others' too. In short, we need to be morally accountable.