

Kenyan firm to make HIV drugs

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the way for other multinationals."

An announcement of the unprecedented agreement between Cosmos and the Kenyan subsidiary of the British multinational will be made at 11am today, at a function involving top officials of the two firms at GSK's Nairobi headquarters. It will be attended by the minister for Trade and Industry, Dr Mukhisa Kituyi.

During recent WTO negotiations, Dr Kituyi was instrumental in pushing for the rights of developing countries faced with the HIV/Aids pandemic to produce generic ARVs.

Under the World Trade Organisation's intellectual property law, a voluntary licence such as that granted by GSK to Cosmos can only be given by the patent holder of a drug to a third party.

The granting of the licences for the three ARVs to Cosmos will make Kenya the second country in sub-Saharan Africa, after South Africa, to manufacture generic ARVs. Kenya will now join the likes of Brazil, Thailand and India in producing the generics of the "critical medicines", which the World Health Organisation (WHO) says are the key to expanding treatment to 3 million HIV-positive people around the world, by next year.

More importantly for people infected with HIV, local manufacture of generic ARVs could see

prices fall from the current Sh3,000 for a month's dose. Government hospitals charge a subsidised fee of Sh1,500 for a month's treatment, which is about half the cost of the drugs.

Local manufacture will also result in a more reliable flow of the life-saving drugs from the factory to the patient, a leading HIV/Aids expert, Dr Ephraim Njagi, said yesterday.

"The current system where we depend on imported ARVs is subject to all manner of variables, including foreign exchange fluctuations and shipping disruptions," Dr Njagi said. "Manufacturing the drugs locally substantially shortens the supply chain."

Cosmos Limited, the manufacturer of such well known brands as Malaratab and Painotab, is one of the country's



Photo/File

A doctor draws blood from a patient for an HIV test. It will now be cheaper to treat HIV-related complications.

leading drug makers and has been agitating for licences and agreements to manufacture ARVs since early last year, when it said it had completed trial runs and quality control checks at its Nairobi Industrial Area factory.

Mid-last year, the company won a tender to supply generic ARVs to the Ministry of Health on the basis that it had the capacity to manufacture the drugs, but shelved the idea because of patent restrictions. Other local pharmaceutical companies that say they can

make generic ARVs include Laboratory & Allied, and Universal Pharmaceuticals.

Yesterday, representatives of various organisations working with HIV/Aids expressed delight at the agreement between Cosmos and GSK.

"This is great news for all Kenyans," Mr Robert Dimba, the programme officer at

The Association of People With Aids in Kenya (Tapwak), said. "We have tried to push for this for a long time, and this is definitely fantastic news."

Ms Christine Jamet, the head of mission for MSF-Belgium, which runs several treatment programmes using generics, added: "This is a good and necessary step for Kenya, but it is important that all parties involved ensure that the right quality standards are maintained."

The big price drop

James cannot believe how the prices of Aids drugs have fallen in the last five years.

He was infected four years ago, and remembers how he would struggle to raise Sh15,000 per month.

"I used to spend almost all my salary to buy the drugs to keep alive," he recalls. "It was difficult to solicit the money from friends and relatives."

"I must thank the international NGOs who have kept me going, otherwise I would have been dead by now," says the 30-year-old businessman.

According to Margaret Nafula of the Women Fighting Aids in Kenya NGO, the prices have sharply declined, from about Sh80,000 per month eight years ago to Sh1,700 currently.

Ten years ago, only the rich could afford the life-prolonging medicines.

"Some HIV-positive people missed the opportunity of living due to the prices of the anti-retrovirals, which were way beyond the reach of many ordinary Kenyans," says Nafula.

The prices fell from Sh70,000 to Sh8,000 in less than eight years, thanks to persistent pressure by lobby groups on the Western pharmaceutical companies. Besides the Sh15,000 budget, James had to ensure he had a balanced diet. "I had to make sure I had good nutrition," he says.

Aids team to buy medicine worth Sh450m

By ODHIAMBO ORLALE

Sh450 million will be used to buy anti-retroviral drugs, the National Aids Control Council boss has said.

The money will be distributed to various organisations to spearhead the war on Aids in the next two months, Dr Patrick Orege said. He was speaking at the Kenya School of Monetary Studies, in Nairobi, yesterday after the opening of a meeting between NACC and donor agencies.

The council, a department in the Office of the President, distributed Sh200 million to 999 Aids groups last month, the official said.

But he denied allegations that some donors like the World Bank were unhappy with the way in which the council was spending the money.

Dr Orege conceded that his council had had problems with 13 of the more 2,000 NGOs and community-based organisations it was working with to combat the disease.

"Most of the organisations that failed to account for funds have been blacklisted. They have also been given an ultimatum to do so, refund the money or be prosecuted," he said, adding that one of the organisations had volunteered to refund Sh1.5 million in 30 days.

Yesterday's meeting was meant to review the progress made in the council's 2002-2005 strategic plan to fight Aids. It was also meant to lay new strategies for the 2005-2010 plan.

The conference was opened by the Permanent Secretary in the Special Programmes ministry, Mr Mahmoud Maalim, on behalf of minister Njenga Karume.

Participants praised the council for making progress in the Aids campaign, but expressed concern over political interference that they said had crept into

constituency Aids committees.

They also criticised some NGOs, which had embezzled Aids funds. Some of the rogue NGOs had the backing of civil servants and some donors, they claimed.

The participants also recommended that voluntary Aids counselling and testing centres (VCTs) be made part of the public healthcare system to give Aids patients access to quality services. The move would also eradicate the stigma attached to the disease, they said.

In the speech read by the PS, Mr Karume expressed confidence in the council, saying, recent statistics showed that the prevalence rate had dropped from 14 per cent to 7.4 per cent.

"The Government decries the fact that 50 to 60 per cent of bed space in hospitals is taken up by people with Aids-related diseases. This country continues to lose valuable man hours as a result of absenteeism from work. We cannot improve our economic and social standards without arresting the HIV/Aids situation," the minister said.

Mr Karume described as "most important" the review of the current national strategic plan and asked participants to come up with a tangible, workable and practical recommendations on how to fight the disease.

But Ms Inviolata M'Mbwavi, a person living with Aids, said the council had its priorities wrong. Instead of holding workshops, it should spend the money on buying drugs for Aids patients, she said.

A public service representative, Mrs Dorothy Kimeu, said 33 Aids control units had been set up to coordinate activities in nine ministries and all the 210 constituencies.

Mr George Wainaina, who spoke on behalf of the private sector, said there was no comprehensive plan to monitor and evaluate the progress made in the war on Aids.

Money to be spent in next two months

EDUCATION

Affected students to get better care

By NATION Reporter

Government bursary schemes will now have special allocations for pupils infected or affected by Aids.

According to a new policy launched by Education minister George Saitoti yesterday, the Higher Education Loans Board (Helb) will similarly identify affected university students for bursaries.

Students in post-secondary and teacher training institutions will also be considered for help, the Education Sector Policy on HIV and Aids stipulates.

"Compulsory HIV testing for any bursary applicants in the education sector is prohibited," says the document launched at the Highridge Teachers Training College in Nairobi.

The Government distributes more than Sh700 million to secondary school students through



Prof Saitoti

the constituency bursary committees.

At the universities, HELB spends about Sh80 million for student bursaries, besides the more than Sh600 million it gives out in loans.

The 45-page policy asks

learning institutions to adopt flexible programmes to accommodate those who are infected, affected or vulnerable to Aids.

"Primary schools will give special attention to factors that affect the performance of orphans and vulnerable children and learners with special needs. They will also provide a means to track down the transition of successful primary school leavers to appropriate next level of education or training," says the document.

Prof Saitoti announced that 300,000 copies of the policy would be distributed to all teachers.

At the same function, USAid country mission director Kiertsak Toh said the organisation had provided Sh12 million for

training on teaching Aids issues. The money will also be used to develop an information system on the impact of Aids.

Yesterday, Prof Saitoti said: "There is no doubt that this scourge is becoming more than a health problem in our country as

Compulsory HIV tests for bursary applicants is prohibited

it encompasses economic, social, political, psychological and cultural dimensions.

"It (Aids) is likely to influence both the supply and demand for education."

The policy has four themes, including prevention, care and support and managing Aids. It also deals with Aids at places of work.

The policy asks schools and colleges to improve Aids counselling.

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