

WAR ON PANDEMIC

Thousands are tested to mark World Aids Day

New infections fall as minister urges Kenyans to go for the crucial test

By JOY WANJA

Hundreds of Kenyans yesterday volunteered for HIV tests to mark the World Aids day.

Kenya also celebrated a decrease in the number of new infections.

New infections among 15-year-olds and above had reduced from 155,000 to 130,000 by last year after combined efforts lobbying for behaviour change. Condom use increased to above 128 million in the same period.

Special Programmes minister Dr Naomi Shabaan encouraged Kenyans to get tested as a step in the fight against HIV/Aids.

"People are far more relaxed and inclined to talk about the disease now than they were 25 years ago," Dr Shabaan said at Kenyatta International Conference Centre yesterday to mark the World Aids Day.

The minister praised efforts by various organisations in creating national awareness on the condition as the country also commemorated a decade of managing HIV and Aids

as a national disaster.

Currently 1.4 million Kenyans are infected with HIV with 250,000 of them on treatment whereas another quarter a million patients in need of the drugs cannot access them.

Governments in developing countries were challenged to step up efforts against HIV/Aids by allocating more funds to fight the disease.

Most countries aspire to expand treatment by providing anti-retroviral drugs to 80 per cent of those in need, but many still cannot get the medicines in most African nations.

On treatment

In Kenya, only half of the 500,000 people requiring the life-prolonging drugs are on treatment which has largely been blamed on lack of access to drugs amongst other factors.

Availability of the life-prolonging drugs in developing countries at the end of 2006 stood at 26 per cent coverage while in 2007 the number increased by nine per cent.

Kenya's National Aids Control Council (Nacc) says 86,000 deaths

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Cabinet Minister Dr Naomi Shabaan being tested for HIV by an Administration Police officer during World Aids Day ceremony at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, yesterday. Photo/JAMES NJUGUNA

have been avoided by scaling up anti-retroviral therapy.

Experts say that making lifelong commitments to support the patients on daily medication has been made more difficult by lack of adequate health infrastructure including staff and supplies of effective drugs.

At least 400,000 people have been tested in the last one week according to government statistics.

The National Aids and Sexually Transmitted Infections Control Programme (Nascop) head Dr Nicholas Muraguri told the Daily Nation that by the end of the exercise they hoped to have tested one million people, 300,000 more people than those tested last year during the national testing.

A decline in HIV prevalence in urban areas was noted though an increase was noted in rural areas.

Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission testing coverage now stands at 94 per cent according to the National Aids Control Council.

Though safe blood supply was still low at 48 per cent, there was increased awareness among the general public on the modes of transmission and prevention strategies.

Universal access

This year's theme centred on 'Universal access to Aids treatment and Human rights' that requires leaders and donors to commit themselves to guarantee treatment for decades, for every person on ARVs.

At Nation Media Group, the chief executive officer, Mr Linus Gitahi launched Voluntary Counselling and Testing and encouraged employees to get tested to lead stress-free lives.

"Knowing your HIV status is important and should be a priority for everyone," Mr Gitahi said before getting tested in one of the three testing tents set up at Nation Centre for the one week testing period.

The launch was presided by Mr Gitahi, Dr Arif Neky, who is the Regional Chief Executive Officer Aga Khan Foundation in East Africa and Ms Nasim Devji, chief executive Diamond Trust Bank.

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