

NATION

Horizon

AGRICULTURE

HEALTH

THE ENVIRONMENT

* SCIENCE

Medics are gripped by fear of 'Aids Doctor' tag

By DENNIS ONYANGO in California and CHAACHA MWITA in Nairobi

Kenya, trails the other East African countries in Aids control efforts despite having the strongest HIV-testing and counselling services.

Although it shares this dubious distinction with Trinidad and Tanzania, the latter has effective community-based Sexually Transmitted Diseases prevention programmes. This translates into effective prevention of new HIV infections, thus staying slightly ahead of Kenya, according to two US researches.

Uganda - a country whose eyes were opened when the scourge brought her to her knees - and Senegal are two African countries with largely successful prevention efforts.

The three East African countries, particularly Kenya, also have high rates of condom usage. Last year's targets for average monthly sales of condoms in Kenya "through the successful Trust social marketing programme" were exceeded by 9.1 per cent. (This refers to Trust condoms alone and does not include other brands and the free ones distributed in bars, lodgings, quasi-brothels and even educational institutions across the country).

The two separate researches conducted across the world over the last three years, by the United States' Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and the University of California's Centre for Aids Prevention Studies, introduce a new dimension in the fight against Aids.

They reveal the deep-seated fear as a hidden stigma that has paralysed the fight against Aids. It prevents health workers from initiating relevant and in-depth talks with patients about Aids.

In Kenya, "many (service providers) have reservations about discussing sexual behaviour with clients and thus may provide condoms only to clients with STIs," according to *Aids Population and Health Integrated Assistance (Aphia) Project - 1999 Mid-Term Review* as done by USAid/Kenya.

It has long been assumed that only ordinary health seekers fear being associated with HIV/Aids. However this new findings indicate that health workers such as doctors and nurses also fear association with the disease - for different reasons though.

As a result, Aids prevention takes a back seat in the health workers' scheme because they fear if they actively participate in it, they could be branded 'Aids Doctors' - a tag that carries with it loss of clients and hence income.

This may partly explain the saturation of brief 'hand-me-down' rules in the fight against Aids. Such cur rules include 'use a condom during intercourse' and 'restrict yourself to one sexual partner' - rules that gloss over, rather than touch the core of, the nature of Aids and its transmission.



President Moi addressing members of parliament during the recent Aids awareness conference in Mombasa. The involvement of political leaders will give the fight against Aids a new impetus

Government inaction blamed for Aids surge

Income loss aside, the researchers reveal, doctors fear that talking about Aids would turn patients away. Some patients would fear visiting an 'Aids Doctor' as they may be thought to be having the disease. Others will keep off for fear that they will be asked to take a test if they visit.

Despite these strong fears among medical practitioners, the researches emphatically recommend that HIV-risk behaviour assessment be a standard part of new patient intake - something health workers are unwilling to do as already seen.

The researches recommend that healthcare providers ask all new patients about condom use, number of sexual partners and sexual orientation to assess a patient's risk for HIV and hence recommend practical preventive measures the best of which are "abstinence and fidelity."

The two researches concur that facts about Aids have reached virtually everyone. In Kenya, this is corroborated by the Aphia project report, which says in part: "Nearly all reproductive women and men have heard about Aids." And yet, the researches say, prevention is near impossible, particularly in rural areas.

HEALTH



Giving a push - Minister Musalia Mudavadi (left), MPs Musikari Kombo (centre) and Fredrick Kalulu take a break during the Mombasa Aids awareness conference

Indeed the Aphia project report acknowledges that "the epidemic is expanding HIV/Aids prevalence among adults increased from five per cent in 1993 to nine per cent in 1997. In almost all sentinel sites in Kenya, the rate of HIV prevalence continues to increase."

Reasons for the increase of HIV/Aids cases despite the widespread knowledge about it are many and varied. They range from the quality of information on Aids available to socio-cultural factors. According to University of California's findings, doctors face specific

and hard challenges on Aids prevention in rural areas.

Rural communities in most cases do not trust health workers to keep medical findings confidential. Most rural communities are therefore reluctant to discuss their sensitive health problems with health workers.

At the same time, the researchers found, most rural set-ups make it hard to keep health problems as confidential as the Aids patients would want. Yet the researchers agree that confidentiality is key to HIV/Aids prevention.

"Testing for HIV," the report says, "discussing sexual practices with clinicians, obtaining drug treatment or buying condoms in local stores - all supposedly important preventive activities - can be hard to do confidentially in rural areas."

The situation is particularly difficult in closely-knit societies - which is what most African societies are anyway!

"Traditional moral values, conformity to community norms and intolerance of diversity can be strong in such communities", making prevention work impossible. In Kenya, such 'values' and 'norms' include wife-inheritance, polygamy and concubine ownership.

TURN TO PAGE 3

Breaking the silence

By KWAMBOKA OYARO

While Kenyan leadership is just about waking up to the Aids reality, Uganda is already reaping the benefits of an early riser.

At a continental women conference held in Addis Ababa Ethiopia last week, Uganda was hailed as a model in the region for successfully campaigning against Aids. When it realized many of its people were dying of Aids, policies and programmes were set up to spread awareness throughout the country.

President Yoweri Museveni, politicians and various stakeholders in the country threw their weight behind the campaign and now the impact is being felt.

Almost all Ugandans know about Aids and how to prevent it. The youth too are actively involved in fighting the menace by distributing condoms to their peers and counselling them on Aids.

"Our aim in Uganda is to see that Aids is eradicated from the country. We do this by advising young people on how to prevent it," Harriet Tereka, a youth representative told the conference.

Ethiopia with 700,000 Aids orphans has three million reported cases of Aids. But unlike in Kenya, church leaders all over the country are talking about Aids openly. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is actively involved in Aids campaigns. It has mobilised its clergy to educate the laity. Muslims are also involved in the campaign in an effort to speed up change of attitude.

These efforts, the conference was told, had reduced the stigma against Aids and people living with Aids are now speaking openly about it.

With Kenya's highest decision-makers in the country declaring Aids a national disaster, the fight is bound to pick momentum. Initially, the government was not giving attention to adolescents, who are sexually active and a big percentage infected with Aids. But now, the promise to include Aids education in school curriculum will have a positive impact in the campaign.

With this strong political will and widespread campaign, Kenya is headed to where its East African neighbours are in the campaign against Aids.

In Tanzania, the government has passed laws protecting women, girls and children from sexual harassment and abuse among other policy developments.

In Rwanda, the ongoing healing process includes talking openly about Aids and its prevention. People are advised not to discriminate against those infected, says MP Prosper Higiro a delegate from Rwanda.

At the closing ceremony, Ethiopian Aids orphans dramatized a song on the hazards caused by Aids which moved delegates to tears.