

NATION Wednesday magazine



One by one to the grave... Aids is systematically wiping out people from the population.

THE AIDS SCOURGE

By CHEGE wa GACHAMBA
OTULA OWOOR
PETER MBEKE

The Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, Aids, was first recognised in Kenya in 1984 after a Kenyan who had never travelled out of the country was diagnosed to be suffering from the disease.

Despite the efforts put forward by the Government and non-governmental organisations to combat what has been described as the plague of modern times, the epidemic has assumed alarming proportions.

Kenians have died in their thousands over the last few years because of Aids.

More than 70 per cent of the people dying from Aids are aged between 20 and 49. They include medical doctors, nurses, teachers, politicians, lawyers, church leaders, administrators, security personnel, journalists, farmers and prisoners.

The cumulative 'reported' number of Kenians who have contracted Aids now stands at about 30,000. Many more cases of Aids deaths and people with full-

blown Aids symptoms go unreported.

A growing number of children are also being born already infected with the Aids virus. More than 1,000 of these children have died of Aids before their second birthday.

The Aids scourge is systematically wiping out the economically productive people from the population and ensuring that children born by mothers who are carriers of the virus also get infected and die within two years of birth.

Research from Kenyan hospitals indicate that, out of every 100 mothers attending antenatal clinics, eight to 10 of them carry the Aids virus. In fact, the figure is higher in places like Kisumu. Eighteen out of every 100 mothers attending antenatal clinics there test positive. Chances are that, their sexual partners also have it.

A scenario of Kenyan villages in the not too distant future, mainly comprising destitute orphans and the aged, is not a far fetched imagination.

In 1985, barely a year after the first Aids case was diagnosed, Kenya was among the first countries to create the National Aids

REVEALING STATISTICS

Reported Aids cases in Kenya number 30,000.
Death toll among babies is more than 1,000.
10 out of 100 mothers attending antenatal clinics test HIV positive.
More than 750,000 adult Kenians have aids virus.
In the next five years 1.7 million Kenians will have Aids virus.

Council to help deal with all aspects of control and prevention of the spread of the disease.

However, despite the prompt action the lethal infection has - like a firestorm in dry savannah grasslands, swept across all parts of the country.

It is already being whispered in donor and biomedical communities that Kenya, like many other African nations, may soon not need any family planning programmes because of the devastating impact of Aids on the populations.

Despite the massive anti-Aids campaign, behaviour change towards 'safer-sex' has been rather slow; while such traditional prac-

tices as widow inheritance, age-mating, polygamy, extra-marital sex for a baby, circumcision and child marriage continue to make the Aids virus to spread even faster.

Today, more than 750,000 adult Kenians are believed to be carriers of the Aids virus. They look strong and healthy, yet they are very deadly to take to bed. They have the capacity to infect their sexual partners who may be in hordes, and the multiplying effect can be catastrophic.

More than half of those already infected will develop the Aids disease in the next 10 years. The economic costs and demand for

health care services will increase tremendously.

The recent influx of nearly 500,000 refugees into Kenya has also created a new dimension to the Aids problem. While it is courteous to assist our brothers and sisters from the famine and war-torn neighbouring countries, some of the problems that come with these refugees are suicidal.

Refugees who test positive for the Aids virus cannot be resettled in other countries. They will therefore continue to be a burden to this country and become a potential source of spreading Aids.

The fact that hospital beds and cots available in the country are less than 50,000 and that there are other health problems that require hospital admission means that Aids patients will have to be taken care of at home by their families.

At present most terminal Aids patients are usually sent 'home' to get treatment from the nearest hospital.

In the next five years, 1.7 million Kenians will be carrying the Aids virus, 415,000 will be having the disease and over 300,000 children will have been orphaned because of Aids. Who will feed,

house, cloth, educate and care for these innocent children?

For most families and communities Aids is a double tragedy. First much resources is spent in treating opportunistic infections and when the victims die there is very little left to sustain the off-springs or dependants.

Aids affects everybody. It is not only a health, economic and social problem, but also a political and security problem. Unless strict measures are taken, Kenya could also be losing large numbers of military personnel and the police because of Aids.

Dr Sobbie Mulindi, an official of the National Aids Control Committee believes that the country's skilled manpower is greatly threatened by Aids.

In some African nations it is said that up to 30 per cent of urban elites are infected.

The head of National Blood Transfusion services, Dr Jack Nyamongo says an average of five per cent of donated blood carries the virus. Sometimes as much as 10 per cent of the blood is infected.

The misconceptions about

TO PAGE III