

The cheap way to manage Aids

With a vegetarian diet and herbal medicine, sufferers can add zest to their lives

By KWAMBOKA OYARO

Didi Ananda Ruchira ushers us into her clinic on Nairobi's Juja Rd. Her flowing orange attire gives her face radiance and solemnity. Pictures with messages on the best ways to avoid contracting HIV/Aids and managing the disease adorn the plywood partitioning the Abha Light Health Centre into five cubicles.

Ruchira is not your typical nun with a white or navy blue headscarf. "I am not a Catholic nun but a sister with the Ananda Marga (the path of bliss) Mission. It is based in India," explains the American-born sister.

Her mission of dedication to God through serving people influenced Ruchira to choose homeopathy and natural medicine.

This morning the clinic is filled with people who have come for treatment and consultation. There are follow-up patients too. On average, the clinic treats 16 new patients daily.

There are Aids patients who have come for their medication, as well as others seeking treatment for diseases like cancer, ulcers, stomach problems, epilepsy, fibroids, tumours, thrush, diabetes, asthma, malaria, acidity/heartburn and skin diseases.

Those seeking treatment for Aids-related complications say the medicines given here soothe and make them feel better; and following the nutrition guidelines make them stronger, they say.

"We have no cure for HIV/Aids but we are able to manage it economically and maintain the patient's quality of life through nutrition," explains Ruchira.

Unlike antiretrovirals, which are expensive and have serious side effects, Ruchira says, with her nutritional treatment, people take charge of their health and are able to lead normal lives despite their HIV status.

Small, effective doses

Her medicine, made from medicinal herbs and animal products, are "given in small, effective doses". She knows the treatment is effective because she studied homeopathy and natural medicine for eight years, she says.

"The pills are so small that many patients are initially sceptical of their efficacy but once they see the effects, they bring along friends also seeking treatment."

When her mission assigned her to Kenya seven years ago, Ruchira started mobile clinics around Nairobi and soon realised that most of the ailments she was treating were linked to HIV.

She became concerned when she realised that most of the patients could barely afford a meal a day, and therefore, lacked vitamins, which are important in fighting diseases. She found this shocking, knowing that the primary treatment for illnesses is nutrition, which builds the body, thereby increasing its ability to ward off opportunistic diseases. As a result, she started researching on the best way to fight HIV in an affordable manner.

In her book, *Great Health, Naturally!*, in which she deals with immunity restoration and digestive health, Ruchira stresses the importance of nutrition in managing diseases, especially HIV/Aids.

"HIV positive and don't know what to do? It is no time to regret but time to take your health in your hands and accept that HIV is a lifelong disease that needs lifelong attention," she writes.

Some people start wasting away and die soon after learning that they are HIV-positive while others have lived for 15 to 20 years and their robust appearance makes some people doubt they are infected.

Knowledge of the stages of HIV infection — acute, latent stage, early symptomatic and established or full blown Aids — is useful in managing the disease.

With good nutritional care, an infected person can maintain his or her health and remain as healthy as the next person. But if they neglect themselves, they quickly deteriorate to the fourth stage, where death is certain.

To determine a person's HIV status, three tests are done to establish infection and its progress. These are HIV antibodies (Elisa), CD4-CD8 count and viral load.

The Elisa test shows the quantity of antibodies the body has produced to fight the virus; CD4-CD8 test counts the number of immune cells circulating in the body (a healthy person has between 360 and 1,000. If the number falls below 100 severe infections occur); and viral load measures the number of viruses in the body.

The book encourages HIV-positive people not to

With good care, infected persons can maintain their health



Photos/Joan Pereruan

Didi Ananda Ruchira displaying her products derived from medicinal herbs and animal sources.

give up on life and provides a nutrition resource for them. It also seeks to answer the question: "What do I do if I first know that I'm HIV positive?"

"The first medicine is acceptance...take a fresh look at your health, at your life. It is not up to doctors to take care of you. It is up to you to take care of yourself and your family," writes Ruchira.

The book dwells on how to restore and strengthen one's immunity and ensure good digestion. Indigestion is a common problem among people living with Aids.

Immune-based nutrition enhances one's health and one doesn't have to depend on drugs. Besides, it has no side effects. If people avoided "modern" food, especially those with lots of sugar, many diseases could be avoided.

"Chromium mineral regulates the pancreas and sugarcane has the highest amount of the mineral. Chewing sugarcane will easily keep diabetes away," says Ruchira. Ironically, chromium is thrown away during sugar processing.

The book, intended for people living with HIV/

Aids, cancer patients, doctors, nutritionists, counsellors and home-based caregivers, gives practical tips for better health through nutrition.

The book comes in handy for patients who cannot afford antiretroviral treatment and food supplements.

So, *Great Health, Naturally!* is tailored to suit the nutritional requirements of Kenyans living below the poverty line without costing them extra money," says Ruchira.

With a Sh50 daily budget, for example, one can

get the food required for restoring one's health. Eating an avocado instead of junk food like chips, for example, is cheaper and more nutritious.

Up to 86 per cent of HIV resides in the digestive tract, mostly in the large and small intestines. It is important for patients to ensure that the intestines are clean and healthy to function effectively. The

patients must assist the body by eating slowly and chewing their food well. Swallowing chunky food exerts pressure on the digestive tract, thereby stressing the immune cells, 40 to 60 per cent of which are along the digestive tract.

With decreased immunity, digestion of these chunks becomes difficult, leading to constipation and poisoning of the body. This weakens the body and severely affects organs like the liver, which has to work overtime to purify blood.

As more people are affected and infected with HIV/Aids, there is an urgent need for correct information on how to deal with infection, immune restoration and home care of HIV-related illness. Although many people know good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle control the progression of HIV, practical information is usually out of reach. Spices and vegetables have a vital role in controlling the activities of the HIV and cancer cells in the body. When ginger, vinegar, garlic, turmeric, cinnamon, cloves, dhanian, curry powder and lemon grass are taken regularly, they inactivate the cells, preventing them from replicating themselves.

Ruchira does not discourage people from taking other medicine after the start of homeopathy. "Our medicine has no side effects," she says.

Making progress

For this reason, Josephine Achieng', 40, still takes ARVs despite coming to the clinic to pick her pills regularly. Achieng' is happy with the progress she is making, five years after she was diagnosed with HIV.

"When I was told about my status I told myself over and over again it is not going to kill me, I am not going to die."

Her determination has borne fruit. She has managed to put four of her five children through secondary school and her business of hawking clothes in Mathare.

She says she is careful with her diet and the pills she has been taking from the clinic for three years now boost her immunity and give her strength. Her CD4 count has risen from 60 to 400.

With great confidence she urges her customers to go for HIV test so that they "get to be in control of their lives. It is important to know your status," she advises.

And Aisha's ulcers and pimples have now cleared after she started on homeopathic treatment. "I moved from one doctor to another and the medicine I was given did not work."

A friend told her to try the medicine and she got her first dose at the end of February. "I was given the tiniest drugs I had ever seen. I wondered how they would work but I took them anyway. After a week, there was a huge difference on my face. It started to clear and I looked at the tiny pills again and was amazed at their effectiveness. Although I no longer take the pills, I eat garlic and I am careful with my diet."

For her stomach problems, thrush and chest pains, patient Rose Wanjiru says the medicine works fast and is not nauseating. Eating warm, healthy food prepared with vegetable oil, Wanjiru says, keeps unnecessary ailments at bay.



The pills are so small that many patients are initially sceptical of their efficacy.