

# Patients set to benefit from cheap Aids drugs

By JEFF OTIENO

The road to cheaper and readily available Aids drugs has been a bumpy one.

Before Kenya got the nod to manufacture generics on Tuesday, many patients fell prey to dubious Aids treatments and ineffective drugs.

Problems started when the Aids spread seemed to overwhelm the Government, pushing the prevalence rates to over 10 per cent.

Now, thanks to relatively cheap generic drugs from Asian countries, many Aids patients can prolong their lives without having to worry about where their next dose of anti-retrovirals will come from.

## Holds patents

The cost is expected to fall further after a Kenyan company, Cosmos Limited, was given the green light to manufacture generics by GlaxoSmithKline, a British pharmaceutical giant. The latter holds the patents for Efavir, Retrovir and Combivir, used in managing the disease.

Following the agreement, Kenya is set to become the second country in black Africa, after South Africa, to manufacture generic ARVs.

Only a few years ago, the epidemic looked unstoppable. At one time, one in every eight adults was HIV-positive and at least 700 were dying of the disease daily.

Desperate to manage the ravages, many patients bought anything in the drugs market in the hope that they would stumble on a cure.

First it was Kemron, the "wonder drug" developed by leading Kenyan scientists in 1990 and launched amid pomp and pageantry at a ceremony presided over by President Moi.

The research team claimed that Kemron could completely reverse the Aids symptoms and eliminate signs of infection in at least 10 per cent of those who used the drug.

However, Kemron's efficacy was questioned by the America's National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, whose research advisory



Photo/Peter Karuri

Trade and Industry minister Mukhisa Kituyi (left), is shown the equipment used to manufacture Aids drugs by Ms Susan Munyiri-Ochieng' of GlaxoSmithKline at their city plant yesterday.

committee urged patients to seek other "therapies whose efficacy has been established in well-designed [and well] controlled clinical trials."

After the Kemron fiasco, many witch-doctors minted millions from selling suspect concoctions. Con men joined the bandwagon, with some selling expired capsules for Sh10,000 by claiming it was a combination of drugs.

## Pearl Omega

Then came Prof Arthur Obel, one of the brains behind Kemron, who invented yet another "wonder drug" — Pearl Omega.

Kenyan's hopes went sky-high, yet again, but not for long. After a few months, the hopes were again dashed after scientists, led by the director of Kenyatta National Hospital, Prof Julius Meme, and University of Nairobi lecturer, Prof Ndinya Achola. They questioned the authenticity of the clinical

trials. The drug was later found ineffective.

Another "cure" was produced by physicist Basil Wainwright, a Nobel nominee and five-time winner of "the Inventors Expo Award".

Dr Wainwright, also known as Dr Stone, was later charged in court for administering unproved treatment referred to as polyatomic apheresis.

His former patients, including a University of Nairobi lecturer, swore affidavits to defend the treatment, saying it offered hope to many desperate Aids patients.

But constant campaigns against the treatment by the Kenya Medical Association and the Kenya Medical Board ensured that the drug was discarded.

With the signing of a new agreement last week, Aids patients can now rest confident that their hopes will not be dashed again.

ASUNTA WAGURA



## It's step in right direction

Manufacturing antiretrovirals is a step in the right direction because "it will save many lives," says Asunta Wagura, one of the first women to publicly declare their HIV status.

She says she would be dead if, in 2002, a company that learned of her condition had not given her the ARVs.

The drugs, called Trizvir, cost Sh9,000 a month, which she could not afford.

Before she started using them, Ms Wagura, founder of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (Kenwa) was on her death bed with a CD4 count of 41, compared with the current 675.

CD4 are antibodies that boost the body's immunity or the defence system.

Kenwa was one of the organisations that fought to give to Third World people living with Aids access to cheaper ARVs manufactured by Western pharmaceutical companies, drugs which were selling at exorbitant prices in the rest of the world.

## Donated by GlaxoSmithKline

GlaxoSmithKline donated drugs to her and other Kenwa members.

Ms Wagura laments the bureaucracy involved in getting the drugs in government hospitals, especially at Kenyatta's comprehensive care centre, which handles HIV patients.

Although the cost eventually went down to Sh400, consultancy, tests and other complicated steps before one got it, cost as much as Sh9,000.

— Mburu Mwangi

JACINTA ATIENO

## A fight Kenya easily won

Plans to make Aids drugs locally have been received with jubilation by Ms Jacinta Atieno.

She tested positive for HIV in 2001 while with her husband and child in Germany and started using Trizvir, an anti-retroviral that costs the equivalent of Sh6,000 a month.

"I was lucky to get this drug for free from an anti-Aids organisation," says Ms Atieno, who became a volunteer HIV/Aids counsellor. She did this until September 2002, when her family had to return home.

At home she was shocked to learn that the same drug cost Sh14,000 a month. With several school-going children, Atieno had to consider other options.

The high cost of drugs was a strain on the family and her university lecturer husband, the sole breadwinner, could hardly cope. She asked her doctor to change the drugs to Combivir and Stockrin, which would cost only Sh4,200 a month.

But at times, the 38-year-old mother of one, was not satisfied with them, and opted for a more expensive drug costing Sh2,200. She continued the group after staying for months doing so.

Despite the difficulties, there is no doubt that the drugs boosted her immunity, which would sometimes fall below the 100 count. Now her CD4 count — the antibodies that boost the immunity or defence system of the body — is 550.

Ms Atieno says that with the news of even cheaper drugs, more Kenyans on the verge of death will survive for long.

"At least, this is one fight Kenyans, both HIV-negative and those living with Aids, can claim to have won hands down, though a little late," she says.

— Mburu Mwangi

# Firm to make ARVs from next month

By NATION Reporter

The local manufacture of generic Aids drugs is set to begin in Kenya.

Trade and Industry minister Mukhisa Kituyi yesterday witnessed as British pharmaceutical multinational GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) licensed Cosmos Limited — a local company — to start work.

GSK holds patents for the drugs lamivudine and zidovudine as well as their combination Combivir.

With the historic signing, the cost of the life-prolonging HIV/Aids drugs is set to go down drastically.

With Cosmos's licensing, Kenya becomes the second country in black Africa, after South Africa, to manufacture generic ARVs.

Brazil, Thailand and India are the other manufacturers of the critical medicines, which the World Health Organisation 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 ARV manufacture could cut the price from the Sh3,000 now needed for a month's dose.

Government hospitals charge a subsidised fee of Sh1,500 for a month's treatment, about half the cost of the drugs.

In the agreement signed yesterday, GSK granted a voluntary licence to Cosmos to manufacture the drugs in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda.

And speaking after handing over the certificate at GSK offices in Nairobi's industrial area, Dr Kituyi said Kenya had made a significant step in providing easy access to ARVs to its citizens at a time when HIV/Aids had been declared a national disaster.

He said: "For the first time, the Government has used its right in law to allow a local company to start manufacturing essential drugs voluntarily."

"The signing of this agreement will go a long way to

repositioning Kenya in the fight against HIV/Aids within East Africa, and bring about the reassuring stand that we can do it and improve the health of our people."

It was now up to Cosmos to prove that it is equal to the task by making generics accessible and affordable to as many infected people as possible.

As a signatory to the World Intellectual Property Organisation and the Trade Related

## The cost of life-prolonging HIV/Aids drugs is set to go down drastically with the new development

Aspects of Intellectual Property (Trips), Kenya had an obligation to protect and respect the rights of all patent holders, Dr Kituyi said.

He challenged local drug companies to enter into partnership with international pharmaceuticals to produce generic drugs not only for HIV/Aids but for other diseases, saying it was the only

way the costs could be reduced drastically.

Two other local companies had declared an interest in acquiring a licence to manufacture such drugs, but more should come out, he said.

The minister said Kenya might force drug companies to manufacture essential drugs for diseases declared a national disaster. This was allowed under the intellectual property rights rules of the World Trade Organisation.

Cosmos chairman and managing director Prakash Patel said his company would supply enough ARVs at an affordable price.

However, he would not say the actual amount the generics would cost, saying the information was "confidential".

Dr William Mwat, GSK medical and regulatory affairs director, said the company had been instrumental over the past year in providing access to ARV medication to people around Africa and in other developing countries. He said GSK has offered preferential pricing of HIV/Aids drugs since 1997.

