**An unnecessary Aids-cure row**

Is this hooha between Kenya's herbalists on the one hand,

and the Kenya Medical Research Institute (Kemri) and the

Director of Medical Services, Prof Joseph Oliech, on the

other, really necessary?

The answer to this question is simply that this brouhaha

is absolutely unnecessary and increasingly unfortunate.

However, if the truth be said, there is a lot at stake both in

terms of prestige and, most important, money in the issue

which has given rise to this sizzling controversy.

To understand why the men whose tools of trade include

herbs, roots, ash and other paraphernalia and their

counterparts who deal with stethoscopes, microscopes,

syringes, blood samples, laboratory-manufactured drugs

and scalpels are engaged in this hoopla, it is imperative to

go back to last December 6.

On that day, the soft-spoken Director of Kemri, Dr Davy

Koech, made a most remarkable and breathtaking

announcement. Kemri, Dr Koech declared, had developed a

promising drug in humankind's struggle against the dreaded

and fatal Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Aids).

This drug, he said, reverses Aids symptoms and gives Aids

sufferers the best chance of leading a normal life.

What does this kind of revelation portend? Instant fame

for Kemri in particular and Kenya in general and, of course,

j he money that is guaranteed to flow in if eventually the

promising drug is developed into a cure. Indeed, even before

the drug is developed into a cure it still is a money-spinner

given the fact that it does, in fact, reverse the opportunistic

diseases that kill HIV carriers ..

While Kenyans were still trying to digest the news from

Kemri, the country's herbalists were up in arms, accusing

the institute of stealing the KE089, the code name of the

drug, from one of their number and arrogating to itself the

honour of its discovery. Now, the herbalists, still adamant

that they have a cure (or Aids, are saying that they will

never ever· collaborate with Kemri again.

About a fortnight ago, a new angle was introduced to the

scenario when a herbalist in Kakamega District .was

reported to have treated and cured an Aids patient at an

hospital in the sugarcane and historical town of Mumias.

Foul Play! screamed Prof Oliech, who, in fact, threatened to

have the herbalist deported because he is not a Kenyan.

The DMS said that the man the Kakamega herbalist

treated was not suffering from Aids but tuberclosis. The

man is adamant he is Kenyan, insists he has an Aids cure

and is challenging the DMS and the Minister for Health,

Mr Mwai Kibaki, to allow him to treat Aids patients in

Government hospitals free of charge.

We doubt that he will be allowed into those institutions

.the veracity or otherwise of his claims notwithstanding. But

the current runs deeper than that. Should the herbalists

and medical doctors not collaborate in the search for a cure

for this scourge? We say they absolutely must.

Should all herbalists be allowed to go public with

announcements about their supposed cures for *Ukimwi?*

Our answer here is an emphatic no. There has to be a way

of having the herbalists liaise with Kemri for their drugs to

be tested before they go to rooftops to broadcast their cures.

We know of myriads of cases where self-styled herbalists

have conned Kenyans out of their cattle, sheep, goats, land

and money. But, is Kemri conning the country's genuine

herbalists out of KE089? That is for Dr Koech and his men

to tell the world and we 'Would like to believe that they are

set to do precisely that when they divulge more information

about KE089.

In the meantime, we would urge that herbalists and

Kemri work together, for theirs is not a service to Kenya's

scientists and herbalists alone, but a service to humankind

threatened with decimation by Aids.