**Aids: A virus with, a country under siege**

**All-round public education the only way out**

The Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome has become a

major menace in Kenya and other nations. It is already causing

indescribable misery, poverty and death". *DR SOBBIE*

*MULINDI,* the. chairman of Information, Education,

Communication of the National Aids Committee examines the

challenges linked to this problem.

The political changes have come

at a time when Aids, that deadly

disease is taking an increasing

toll on the population.

But typical of their nature,

Kenyans politicians are taking

more time talking about other

things instead of educating the

people about it.

And the people need educating

because through no fault of some

of them, many people do not really

understand just how serious

the Aids problem is. What is

more, the figures usually published

in the press about the

number of victims is usually just

the tip of the iceberg.

Information obtained from

blood donors, published studies

and surveillance done by the National Aids Programme, show prevalence rate of 7.5 per cent

nationwide. There are more than

700,000 Kenyans infected with

the Aids virus. They are healthy

carriers who easily infect others.

There may be 1.7 million HIV

carriers in 1996.• The most hit

areas are Coast Province,

Nyanza, Western and Nairobi.

But people in all parts of Kenya

are at risk.

Aids is a leading cause of premature

death. It will be one of

the most serious epidemics of

this century. Kenya faces a vast

and growing burden of illness and

death associated with HIV/Aids.

It will have tragic consequences

for individuals, families and communities

and devastating consequences

for health services and

the economy.

The National Aids Committee

has tried to sensitise the public

through the mass media, seminars,

workshops and conferences.

The committee has met with lawyers,

parlimentarians and is fully

involved in the global anti-Aids

struggle.

There are many highly skilled

Kenyans in whom the country

has heavily invested who will die

if a cure is not found within five

years. Kenyans will have to overcome

the fear and ignorance

linked to Aids and its mode of

transmission because it can lead

to social rejection, stigmatisation

and discrimination.

These people can be sacked

from their jobs, refused treatment

by doctors and nurses.

They may be expelled from foreign countries, refused housing,

schooling, insurance and exploited

from fake cures

The only way to overcome

these issues is through massive

health education campaigns and

counselling.

Specific mechanisms of changing

behaviour include modification

of sexual practices of infected persons, routinely offering

testing and counselling to persons

at high risk. Effective information

and education include a

wide spectrum of activities ranging

from radio, TV. print media,

barazas to individual counselling

sessions.

Education

The health education component

of the National Aids Committee

is directed to the general

public, school and college aged

young persons, to other persons

at risk and to health workers.

The lethal infection devastates

the youth who are not only sexually

active, but also those who are

economically productive and are

the backbone of the economy and

the future.

Immaturity among the youth

results in unstable sexual relationships (like not having one

stable faithful partner).

Cross-national mobility enhances

the risk of being infected

by the virus. This means that

more has to be done to educate

the youth about safer sex without

pretences. Those involved in the

school curricula development

should speed their efforts in this

direction.

Aids will have an effect; on

marriages and demography.

There will be a great deal of anxiety

and hesitation to marry. Couples

already infected, will give

birth to babies with HIV. This

will affect the normal age groups

within the population.

Already, some youth in our institutions

(Secondary schools,

colleges, universities) are infected

with HIV and go on to infect others.

This trend must be arrested

at all costs.

Sex education emphasising

prevention of Aids must be

taught in all learning institutions.

Teachers and Parents Association

as well as the Kenya

National Union of Teachers have

a crucial role to play since they

are in daily contact with the

youth.

In Kenya, like other African

nations, Aids is a family disease.

The death of one spouse will

automatically lead to the death of

the other spouse. Therefore, children

are going to be orphaned

and abandoned.

The loss has emotional, psychological

and economic implications

to the family and community

at large.

In 1996, it is estimated that

about 300,000 children will be left

orphans. Indeed this will 'be a big

burden. Many children will be orphaned

and because of lack of extended

family care due to economic

hardships, there will be an

increase in "rural and urban

homeless children.

These children will be further

vulnerable to HIV infection

through need for shelter, food,

money and exchange for sex.

There is going to be increased

family instability (fights, suicides,

rape, theft, and won).

There will also be Aids caused

stress and various psychiatric

disorders that can lead to some of

the above.

There is lack of trained counsellors

and services to cope with

the problem. Aids will cause demand

for medical care unheard of

in human history; difficult policy

decisions (home-based care, community

care) will be required for

treatment of Aids victims.

Aids has become one of the

gravest threats to public health

and there will be shortage of

drugs due to increased opportunistic

infections among: HIV infected

persons.

There is need to determine

health services costs (direct

costs) as well as the cost in lost

productivity (indirect costs) that

will result from illness and premature

death not only of patients

but also of health workers. There

will be need to increase resources

allocated to the health sector.

It is expensive to afford palliative

care (AZT, Kemron,

Immunex and so on). The already

impoverished patients faced with increasing inflation will find it

extremely expensive to buy drugs

as well as struggle to survive with

meagre resources.

Aids death will equal or exceed

death from all other causes.

Individual rights will be infringed

(travel, housing, school,

work and so on). The Government

that comes to power will

need to make a firm stand not to

discriminate HIV/Aids persons.

Family rights versus confidentiality

poses another ethical problem.

The question of partner notification

upon being diagnosed

HIV positive will prove increasing

difficult for individuals as

well as families.

There is the issue of Society

Rights (Public Health Act);

Criminal law (eg. when .one

knows he/she is already infected

with virus and goes on to infect

others indiscriminately). Counselling

is therefore crucial in preventing

such cases. Health workers

must be provided with

adequate skills in counselling to

be able to assist patients

effectively.

Policy

Inheritance and other social,

cultural practices (polygamy, circumcision,

ear-piercing and so

on) will have to be reviewed.

There is need for policy guidelines

since these socio-cultural

practices have been known to

spread Aids.

The insurance industry will

need to be streamlined and given

guidelines on various forms of insurance

with the HIV/Aids in

mind. Life insurers are exposed

to increased liabilities on existing

policies and there is a need to

limit future liabilities.

The insurance companies

should also take a leading role in

educating their clients about Aids

since they would not like to 'lose

business caused by pre-mature

death.

What about leaders who are as

mortal as the rest of the people?

Many have died and many more

will die unless they change their

ways.

This brings in the issue of a

leadership vacuum in many areas

which can be very dangerous.

Lack of good leaders can cause

external interference. Uncontrolled

Aids will cause insecurity

because of the loss of key persons,

especially in the army, police,

prisons. CID, Special Branch

and other security related

organisations.

Manpower loss (in industry,

agriculture, education and so on)

will have a negative impact on

productivity and training. Vital

earnings will dwindle. This will affect the labour force of the sugar,

tea and coffee growing industries

reducing production in these

and other key sectors.

Tourism and foreign exchange

earnings will be badly affected by

the impact of Aids. Apart from a

number of areas, food production

will fall as the disease spreads to

the rural areas. Many women

who work on farms will die from

Aids after being infected by husbands

who worked as migrant

workers in the urban setting.

Aids will divert resources away

from all other preventable and

treatable diseases and health programmes.

Aids will also have impact

on the Stock Market.

The -control and prevention of

Aids threat should be coordinated

directly from the Office

of the President to mobilise all

Sectolll of the society. There should be top level

interministerial consultations on

how to handle effectively the

Aids situation in the country.

There should be intensified

subsidized media campaign, budget allocation for different ministries to help control Aids. The

Government and private sector

should devote adequate resources

and an Aids fund should be started

soon.

The Aids Programme Secretariat

lacks facilities for the effective

implementation of' the

Programme.

Faced with one of the greatest

epidemics of our time, any future

government must make prevention and control of HIV a priority

of all priorities.

Tomorrow: Agriculture

A nurse takes blood from a baby infected with the Aids virus in a New York Hospital. Unless a lot of hard'

work in public education and counselling in prevention is done, the Kenyan situation could pull out of

control, warn the experts.