Change this negative view Aids

It is a saddening thing that lately, whenever

a young person dies in circumstances

other than' those surrounding a

road accident, the word quickly goes

round that the person was an Aids victim.

The family of the deceased is viewed

by the majority with suspicion while an

air of general disrepute surrounds the

deceased's name.

The purpose of this letter is not so much to

frown upon the whispering behaviour of Kenyans

- for gossip is as much a part of nature

as sleeping and eating - but, rather, to challenge

Kenyans to rise above the pettiness and

fear that have led us into socially ostracising

Aids victims and their families.

The attitude many people have developed

towards Aids-sufferers and their families has

a lot to do with, first, the ignorance and misinformation

that many of us have about the

disease and, second, the secrecy and trepidation

with which victims and their families

handle the affliction spreads a cloak of mystery

and dread around the subject of Aids;

The immediate and urgent question is

whether Aids can be viewed in a positive or,

at least, informed and acceptable manner. In

this regard, it may be useful to look at the

ways in which other societies have handled

Aids. In so doing, one comes to the realisation

that there is much to be gained from a policy

of openness and transparency as we strive to

live with this problem.

This sort of approach began with the late

American actor Rock Hudson who in 1985

went public with the shocking news that he

had Aids. This admission went a long way

into jolting Americans to the reality of Aids.

Institutes were set up to further research into

a cure for the disease and .charity funds were.

set up to boost these institutes.

The fascination that Hollywood always conjures up in the minds of the public became

a useful tool for spreading information and

changing attitudes. For the black community

in the US, famous sports celebrities like

"Magic" Johnson and Arthur Ashe are, by

their frank admissions, spreading knowledge

as well as humanness about Aids and its

victims.

Lest we begin to associate this public approach

with the developed World, ,let me

quickly give the example of neighbouring

Uganda. There, Phily Lutaya, a locally-born

musician of international fame, did for the

Ugandans what Rock Hudson did for the

Americans.

Once he learnt of his affliction, Lutaya returned to Uganda from his sojourn in Belgium,

admitted publicly that he was dying of

Aids and embarked on a campaign to show

Ugandans, from his personal example, what

Aids is all about. In Uganda today, education

about Aids is a national prerogative. The

Government and its people are handling the

disease with forthrightness and sincerity.

Ugandans will tell you with amazing dignity,

the way Aids has affected their families.

It is with this kind of dignity that former

President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia told

the nation, and indeed the world at large, that

his son had died of Aids. In his view, what is

important about Aids is not so much where it

came from, but, more correctly, where it is

taking us. A forward-looking and positive

view that need not be fatalistic.

Here in Kenya, we have had a number of

individuals making the admission that they

have tested HIV-positive. The majority of

these people are now members of the Know-

Aids Society which has dedicated itself to

spreading facts about Aids countrywide. But

given the negative attitude most Kenyans

have towards Aids, and given also the sheer

magnitude of the disease and the equally staggering ignorance with which Kenyans confront

the disease, I would argue that the

Know-Aids Society has failed.

The reason behind the lukewarm success of

this organisation is a simple one. With all due

respect to the people who head this body, it is

true to say that none of them was a national

figure prior to their involvement in the Aids

campaign.

The principle behind the success of Rock

Hudson in the 'US and Phily Lutaya in

Uganda is that the public responds positively

to people in positions of authority, be it social

or political. Or, as a psychologist would put it,

leaders are role-models. People look up to

them, they long to emulate their actions, to

copy their behaviour and mannerisms.

As far as national attitudes to Aids go, what,

Kenyans are in dire need of is the challenge of

personal example from the quarters of our

national figures.

We have heard (only in whispers, of course)

of claims that some politicians, high-ranking

technocrats and businessmen of national stature

have Aids. I want to argue here that if

indeed some of these claims are true, and if

just one of these personalities were to come

out into the open with a public admission of

their affliction, our currently negative view of

Aids would be nothing short of revolutionised.

To begin with, that individual's stature

would be, raised. Not that they would immediately

be exalted, but, with time, the public

would view with admiration his forthrightness

and courage. This kind of public approach

does, of course, demand the remarkable

stamina and courage of a victim's family.

What this also means is that Government

efforts to educate *wananchi* about the HIV

virus will have been made much more easier.

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