

It's not a life sentence

■ The Health Department has set up one-stop centres to make services accessible to all affected by HIV and AIDS

■ However, most of those who visit the centres are still women. Men are still not too comfortable with knowing their status.



By Ndivhuwo Khangale

In the past many people died of Aids without anyone knowing about their status.

This happened mainly because those who were living with the disease were afraid of being isolated by their own communities.

Now with the government's comprehensive plan to provide better treatment and control of the disease, people's behavior is changing.

More people are visiting HIV and Aids Service Points that the government started a year ago. At these stations people are able to know their HIV status and get free help.

Services

The points provide services such as distribution of condoms, HIV and Aids information and education, voluntary counseling and

testing (VCT) as well as giving antiretroviral drugs and nutritional supplements.

The government is spending over R1,5 billion on the programme which also deals with caring, treating and giving support to those infected and affected by HIV and Aids.

Aim

The aim of the plan, which was approved by the Cabinet in November 2003, is to improve the services to people living with HIV and Aids and those who live with them.

To find out more about the V.C.T.s in your area

Gateway Call Centre 1020
e-Gateway www.gov.za

When the programme started its aim was to have at least one unit in each of the country's 53 health districts. That has been done and now the target is at least one service point in half of the 284 municipalities.

Target

"Currently we have already exceeded our target by covering 60% of municipalities covered with 192 service points especially in the rural areas," he said.

Staff includes doctors, counselors, professional nurses, pharmacists, dieticians, and clerks. The number of staff at a service point depends on how many people it helps a year.

The programme dealt with amongst other things, prevention of the HI virus from mother to child, provision of treatment, care and support VCT, visiting areas where prostitution is high, TB and other HIV related diseases.

At a V.C.T. point

- You meet a counselor who will explain the importance of testing
- The counselor will then ask you to sign an approval (consent) form to be tested
- After testing, you wait for the results which could be available the same day or may take some time
- When the results are out, whether positive or negative, you will be counseled again depending on your status and you are also told to come for another test after six months to fully confirm your status
- If you have tested positive,

your CD 4 count (cells that defend you from disease) is tested, and if it is less than 200, you qualify for antiretroviral treatment provided.

- A tuberculosis (TB) test is done because many HIV positive people suffer from TB and other opportunistic diseases.

You will also be introduced to a support group where you receive counseling and get training on different life skills like starting your own backyard gardens.

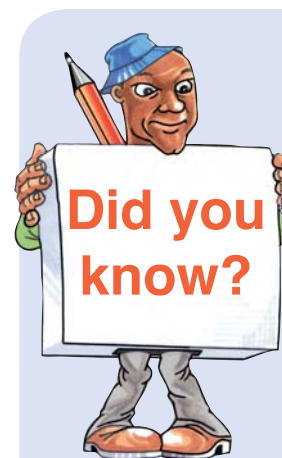
How we did it



Dumisa Mbisi (38) of Them-bisa, Ekurhuleni is a man full of energy. Mbisi is HIV positive. He is very popular with his jokes and loud laughs with other patients at a HIV and Aids unit based in Them-bisa Hospital.

He is a totally different person from what he was in January this year. Then he used to hide inside the house because he did not want the community to know about his HIV status.

"As a man I thought it will be very stupid of me to make my status known. I could not walk or talk and my whole body had sores. My mother encouraged me to join other patients at the clinic. I started in January and was put on ARVs. Now I am a healthy person again and the community is very supportive. I want to encourage other men to come forward and stop dying in hiding," Mbisi said.



"A few patients have died, but many have made good recovery."

The Them-bisa Service Point started distributing antiretrovirals in June 2004. Dr Ayanda Gasela and Dr Maryet Mogashoa who run the station said they see about 150 HIV patients a day. "We already have 17 288 adult patients and 2 682 children since June last year. A few patients have died, but many have made good recovery. Most of our patients are women because men do not want to tell their status."

"It is important to always take tablets and follow all the advice given by the doctor," Gasela said.