TAKING A STAND AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE

WORLD AIDS DAY:

DR SAMUKELISO DUBE

WORKING TOGETHER TO SPREAD AWARENESS

WORLD AIDS DAY: 20TH ANNIVERSARY

## November 2008

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Work together to spread awareness

As a health worker you have the power to play an important role in HIV prevention. As millions of people around the globe mark World AIDS Day, Dr Samukeliso Dube offers advice on making a difference.

Article by: Netanja van der Westhuizen.

Over the years, health workers have been instrumental in healthcare reforms, and on days such as World AIDS Day (1 December 2008), the importance of these reforms becomes even more relevant. Think back to 1978 when the Declaration of Alma-Ata was signed and a major milestone in the public health field was achieved. Now, 30 years later, health workers can make a similar impact in HIV prevention efforts, says Dr Samukeliso Dube, Africa programme director for the Global Campaign for Microbicides (GCM). Having worked in the human rights, civil society and research sectors, this medical doctor believes nurses have one of the most important roles to play in HIV prevention.

"In most regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, nurses are a major source of health-related information in communities, having a huge impact in the areas where they work and live. But health workers can also make a difference on a national scale and this is a call to action to these powerful players. Theirs are the voices that not only ordinary citizens, but also government, listen to," says Dr Dube.

Spotlight on prevention

"Prevention is key to the control of infectious diseases. At the moment, however, most HIV advocacy efforts are centred on access to treatment. The same energy should be invested in HIV prevention, especially if you consider that 1 000 South Africans are infected with the virus every day. Global and local organisations are playing their part in the prevention field, but health workers should also make a stand. They are the people who bear the brunt of the disease on a daily basis. I became passionate about HIV prevention when I had to write out 11 death certificates due to AIDS on one day. I am sure that many nurses can relate to that — they have been overburdened by the disease," she says.

Dr Dube also points out that the majority of nurses are women first and professionals second. And women are most vulnerable when it comes to HIV and AIDS. "This fact adds impetus to female health workers' need to become involved. As women, we need to demand that we are protected against HIV. The history of reproductive health, and particularly family planning, also teaches us that greater healthcare worker involvement is essential to successful programme implementation when women's health is at stake."

Prevention methods

In the healthcare setting HIV prevention should start with thorough knowledge about existing and newer prevention methods, she says. Male condoms and the behaviour change approach have become well known as a result of public awareness campaigns. Unfortunately, other methods haven't been promoted as vigorously. These include treatment of STIs, which can reduce HIV rates, and female condoms, an effective method that also empowers women.

In clinical trials in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, male circumcision has also shown 60 per cent efficacy. It was noted as a promising prevention method in the government's 2007 National Strategic Plan (NSP).

Newer methods such as microbicides (a range of topical products that can prevent HIV) are in the pipeline, and HIV vaccines are also in various stages of development. "As healthcare professionals we can't just advocate male or female condoms. We need a multi-pronged approach. I believe that investment into newer methods should be advocated for, even if they are not yet available. If we don't, microbicides, for example, may prove efficacious, but this knowledge will be 'packed on the shelf' just like male circumcision. This means we'll miss many opportunities to protect lives," adds Dr Dube.
What can nurses do?

Dr Dube encourages nurses to become HIV prevention advocates. "Advocacy is a way for nurses to be champions for women (including themselves) and to work towards the collective goal of reduced HIV incidence," she says. She suggests that health workers follow these steps to become advocates of HIV prevention:

- Be informed. For example, explore what you have heard (both positive and negative) about the female condom. Consider how you might help women, who need an alternative to male condoms, to develop strategies that resolve any concerns they may have with the female condom. Learn as much as you can about existing HIV prevention methods, and stay up-to-date with new developments like microbicides.
- Destigmatise the illness and the use of prevention methods. "Our main purpose should be to stem the disease. Beware of stigma and treat every patient as you would like to be treated," she says.
- Share your knowledge wherever you go — it can be in one-on-one consultations or at community gatherings. Be open about prevention methods and immediately address any misperceptions.
- Harness the power of the associations you belong to. Join other organisations and publicly call for more investment and governmental support for research, the dissemination of existing evidence about prevention methods and the increased availability and implementation of options. "For example, nurses can demand that circumcision becomes policy. They can demand that government invest more in the female condom so that this life-saving tool becomes more widely available," says Dr Dube.

Where does she see South Africa in 15 years if nurses don't play their part? "I think we will have all these new technologies that can prevent HIV, but they may not be implemented. If that happens, the incidence of HIV will still be the same, if not worse. If we promote prevention, however, the epidemic is going to take a different direction. We all need to work together, and health workers are the missing piece of the puzzle." NU

For more information about microbicides, visit www.global-campaign.org or write to:
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