

Launch of the New HCT Campaign

South African Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi has announced the launch of a new campaign to mobilise all South Africans to get tested for HIV and to ensure that every South African knows their HIV status.

Called HCT, or HIV Counselling and Testing, the campaign replaces VCT, or Voluntary Counselling and Testing. It will be a more direct campaign, actively encouraging people to test and aims to test 15 million people by June 2011.

The force behind the change, the reconstituted SANAC, is pushing for mass testing as it believes access to HIV counselling and testing is a gateway into HIV prevention, treatment and care. The testing and counselling will be available at all government hospitals and clinics, all universities and FET campuses, and mobile clinics operating in villages, rural areas, and other remote areas of the country. This initiative will mobilise all those working in the health sector, including volunteer community care workers as well as retired health professionals.

The government has already made 2.1 million test kits available across the country with an additional 1.9 million test kits ordered. The rest shall be ordered as the campaign progresses. Condom distribution will also be drastically increased under this campaign, with each person undergoing HCT receiving 100 condoms. Further, a billion condoms will be distributed to public facilities, especially FIFA-accredited hotels, hospitals and clinics.

The President and Deputy President will launch the campaign on 15th of April at Natalspruit Hospital in Ekurhuleni district in Gauteng. Ministers, as well as members of SANAC, will kick off the campaign by testing first.

The HCT campaign will also involve screening for other health issues, namely, blood pressure, diabetes, anaemia and tuberculosis.

The HCT campaign has been rolled out along with revised treatment guidelines which increase access of particularly vulnerable HIV-positive patients such as infants, those co-infected with HIV and multidrug-resistant TB, as well as pregnant women and TB patients whose CD4 counts are ≤ 350 (see related story below, 'Positive Expansions to South Africa's ART Programme'). These campaigns are under the government's umbrella directive for more decisive and active interventions to curb the HIV epidemic in South Africa, called 'Business Unusual', and follows the government's ongoing theme for tackling HIV and AIDS: "I am responsible, we are responsible, South Africa is taking responsibility."

While this initiative will give a much more accurate depiction of the extent of the epidemic, there are concerns about the capacity of the health sector to adequately support and treat those who do test positive, especially the capacity to provide treatment to the masses who will be found in immediate need of ART.

For more information, please visit the SANAC website at <http://www.sanac.org.za/resources/art-guidelines>. To read Dr Aaron Motsoaledi's statement on the launch of the new HCT campaign, please click here <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2010/10032611051001.htm>

Positive Expansions to South Africa's ART Programme

The month of April 2010 will see major changes to national HIV/AIDS treatment guidelines come into effect which will bring the provision of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in South Africa closer to international best practice.

South Africa boasts the world's largest antiretroviral therapy programme, with nearly a million people initiating treatment in the public sector. South Africa has provided ART to HIV positive patients whose CD4 count (a measurement of the strength of the immune system) is 200 or less. In an effort to curb new infections, the revisions to the treatment guidelines will see a significant scale up of ARV provision to infants and pregnant women, as well as those co-infected with TB and HIV.

World Health Organisation Treatment Recommendations

In 2009 the World Health Organisation (WHO) updated its guidelines for antiretroviral therapy provision in order to provide first class recommendations and to assist national governments to formulate their health policies. This update comprised improvements and upgrades to the recommendations contained in the 2006 guidelines, specifically:

Earlier provision of ART to patients who present with a CD4 count of 350 or less (instead of CD4 count of 200 as per 2006 guidelines)

WHO states that treating HIV positive patients early or before they become unwell is crucial to prevent higher rates of opportunistic infection and early mortality.

South Africa's Revised Guidelines

As of 1 April 2010, all HIV positive infants, regardless of their CD4 count, will be provided ARVs.

The PMTCT regimen has been improved: Pregnant HIV positive women will now be eligible to begin ART at a CD4 count of 350, rather than the current policy of waiting for the CD4 count to fall below 200. Providing ART to expectant mothers could reduce the transmission of mother to child infection to less than 5%.

Immediate ART will now be provided to multidrug-resistant TB patients, and patients co-infected with TB and HIV are now eligible to begin ART at a CD4 count of ≤ 350 instead of 200.

These changes to South Africa's treatment provision could see a significant reduction in infant and maternal mortality due to HIV as well as lowering the rate of new infections.

There have also been revisions to the treatment drugs: D4T was replaced with tenofovir for new patients and existing patients on D4T can be put on tenofovir if they experience side-effects from D4T. Also, DDI was replaced with AZT in second-line treatment.

Limited Eligibility Remains

However, these revised guidelines will only apply to infants under one year, HIV positive pregnant woman and patients co-infected with HIV and TB. The revised treatment eligibility threshold of a CD4 count of 350 will not be extended to other HIV positive individuals in South Africa.

AIDS activists in South Africa such as the Treatment Action Campaign have long been calling for an increase to the treatment eligibility threshold to a CD4 count of 350. They state that the current policy of waiting for CD4 counts to fall to 200 often means patients are seriously ill and the treatment comes too late. Rebecca Hodes, director of policy, communications and research at the AIDS lobby group, Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), believes that universally raising the threshold for treatment eligibility has the potential to save thousands of lives.

Capacity Challenges

However capacity constraints have caused South Africa to lag behind other countries in the region in adopting the 350 CD4 count threshold for commencing treatment. South Africa already has the world's largest ART programme which it needs to expand in a long-term, sustainable fashion. Once a patient begins on ART they must continue their treatment regime without interruption or else they risk developing a drug-resistant form of HIV, an issue which has huge implications for national and international treatment programmes. Therefore, treatment availability and delivery must be sustainable. There was also debate within the HIV and AIDS sector over appropriate treatment regimens, with cheaper ARV drugs which are seeing increased reported side effects in patients possibly being phased out and replaced.

Although these debates and capacity challenges have slowed South Africa's alignment with WHO recommendations on HIV treatment provision, the revised guidelines are a positive step forward and reflect the message conveyed on World AIDS Day 2009 that government is committed to extending its ART programme.

Sources:

Address by President Jacob Zuma on the occasion of World AIDS Day, Pretoria Showgrounds, 1 December 2009

<http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2009/09120112151001.htm>

Plus News/IRIN, 'South Africa: New treatment guidelines announced', 23 February 2010

<http://www.plusnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=88207>

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<http://www.plusnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=85594>

World Health Organisation, *Rapid advice: antiretroviral therapy for HIV infection in adults and adolescents*, 30 November 2009 <http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/arv/advice/en/index.html>

South Africa National AIDS Council, ART Guidelines, <http://www.sanac.org.za/resources/art-guidelines>