



FIGHTING HIV/AIDS IN THE AGE OF COVID - 19

THE FIGHT TO CURB THE SPREAD OF THE "DOUBLE PANDEMIC" IS AS VITAL AS EVER



Today, we join the rest of the world to commemorate World Aids Day under the theme "Working together to end inequalities AIDS, TB and COVID-19. Get Tested. Get Vaccinated. Adhere to Treatment."

The theme is self-explanatory enough: in HIV/AIDS and COVID - 19, we are facing a double-pandemic that demands our urgent attention and action.

The South African Government and its strategic allies have worked very hard over the years to improve access to Anti-Retroviral Treatment.

With no fewer than 7,7 million people living with HIV in South Africa today, our country nevertheless carries the unfortunate distinction of having one of the world's highest HIV prevalence rates.

As the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, we are the second most affected by HIV and AIDS, with more than 2, 061 million people living with HIV, while 42 619 new infections have been reported in 2021 alone.

As at September 2021, 1 632 045 people living with HIV were enrolled on Anti-Retroviral Treatment in KwaZulu-Natal.

THE THREAT POSED BY COVID - 19 ON HIV/AIDS RESPONSE

The emergence of COVID - 19 has added to our challenges, negatively affecting our HIV/AIDS response.

Due to the pandemic, a lot of people were not able to access healthcare services because of the Hard National Lockdown that had to be imposed. Many people feared that they would contract COVID - 19 at our hospitals - something which was misguided and unfortunate.

As a result, we were not able to screen, test and retain on treatment as many people as we needed to - especially, considering the deadly relationship that exists between COVID - 19 and HIV and AIDS.

But our situation is further complicated and made more urgent by the fact that people whose HIV viral load is not well-managed are especially vulnerable to COVID - 19 complications or death. Therefore, the need for Government to find all people living with HIV, initiate and retain them on treatment has never been greater than it is now.

We therefore wish to urge everyone who have previously been on ART before that they need to visit their nearest Primary Health Care clinic, and ask to be put back into the system.

FOURTH WAVE: LET'S PULL UP OUR SOCKS AND BUCKLE UP

As society, we all have a shared responsibility to buckle up and, not for once, let our guard down.

As a Province, we are doing everything possible to ensure that our systems and health infrastructure are ready for the anticipated resurgence of infections, otherwise known as the Fourth Wave. Our vaccination programme continues to offer hope that with more people vaccinated, we are confident that we will soon reach population immunity

Currently, 94 percent of all people living with HIV in KZN know their HIV status, while 85 percent of all people with diagnosed HIV infection are on anti-retroviral treatment.

A further 91 percent of all people receiving treatment have a suppressed viral load. As a Province, we are proud of the community of Eshowe which, in 2019, was recognised by the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), for being able to attain the 90-90-90 targets.

Again last year, Umzinyathi, Ugu and Harry Gwala District Municipalities managed to achieve the 90-90-90 targets. We are determined to build on this success, but our plans are only as good as how citizens respond to them.

CALL TO ACTION:

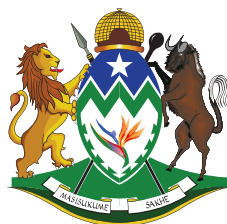
We are now pleading with the people of KwaZulu-Natal to help us win the war against COVID - 19 and HIV and AIDS by doing the following little things that could ultimately make all the difference and save scores of lives:

GET VACCINATED: Vaccination is safe, and vital because it enables the body to fight COVID - 19 upon infection. If you are vaccinated, you become highly unlikely to become severely ill, get hospitalised, or pass away from COVID - 19.

GET TESTED: We must all understand that being HIV positive is not a death sentence. Many people are living with HIV are able to live full, productive and happy lives by taking their Anti-Retroviral Treatment.

ADHERE TO TREATMENT: When a patient is on treatment and adhering to the agreed-upon consumption schedules, their viral load becomes controlled, and they are less likely to become severely ill, get hospitalised, or even pass away due to COVID - 19.

ABSTAIN OR USE CONTRACEPTIVES: Abstaining from sex or using condoms - and a range of other family planning methods that are available free of charge - prevents sexually-transmitted infections, as well as unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.



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