

# News bites

## International

### Half of Haiti injured are children

US researchers have said they fear almost half of all those injured by the devastating Haiti quake may be children, urging relief agencies to plan accordingly. A statistical study by a specialist group at the Children's Hospital Los Angeles and the University of Southern California showed that those hurt in the 12 January quake will likely 'include an extraordinarily high number of children, more than 110 000, nearly half of the estimated total'.

The study was conducted by Jeffrey Upperman and Robert Neches, who have developed a software tool to help medical service providers plan their responses in the case of disasters and accidents involving children. Using existing data, the Pediatric Emergency Decision Support System (PEDSS) uses statistical methods to estimate how many of the victims of a disaster may be children and what care they may need.

'Such needs in Haiti are particularly intense, because fully 35% of the population is under 15, meaning the estimated total number of injuries (250 000) contains far more children than it would in other areas,' the researchers said in a statement. They stressed that injured children had different medical needs, such as thinner hypodermic needles, the correct doses of children's drugs, and paediatric specialists. The software works with seven age groups, and applying its programme to the population of Haiti it predicted that half of the injured, about 44% or 111 000, could be under the age of 18. It estimated that about 1 000 children aged between 6 and 8 had suffered crush injuries, and calculated how many doses of specific drugs to treat such injuries would be needed.

## Africa

### Army worms damage crops in Malawi

A persistent dry spell and an army worm outbreak in Malawi have destroyed about 35 000 hectares of crops, threatening the food security of 123 000 families so far, a senior government official said last month. Army worms have attacked nine districts and destroyed 5 000 hectares of crops, while 30 000 hectares of maize have been damaged owing to the dry spell,

information gathered from the country's eight Agriculture Development Divisions showed. 'The army worm situation is now under control and in some areas people have replanted,' Andrew Daudi, principal secretary in the ministry of agriculture said.

Army worms, which can grow to around 5 cm in length, are moth caterpillars and when present in large numbers can destroy swathes of vegetation and crops. The Farmers Union of Malawi (FUM) said hunger was looming in the poor southern African country. It called on the government to act urgently. 'There are signs of widespread hunger because of the dry spell and the damage caused by army worms,' FUM president Abel Banda told Reuters. 'When parliament meets next week, this issue should be top of the agenda because the crop is not good out there.'

The country harvested a hefty 1.3 million ton maize crop last year, its fifth consecutive surplus of the staple. Experts said long-range forecasts suggested South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, and most parts of Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and the southern half of Angola would have below average rainfall in the summer rainy season, which runs from October to March. The major cause, known as the El Nino effect, is driven by an abnormal warming of the eastern Pacific Ocean and creates havoc in weather patterns across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

## South Africa

### SA professor heads world surgical society

Ken Boffard, a South African professor based at Johannesburg's Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital, has been elected as world president of the International Society of Surgery. Boffard becomes the first president of the society to come from Africa in the organisation's 110 years of existence and is the first trauma surgeon to be elected to this position. He said his appointment would give him the opportunity to improve surgical education in situations where it was not necessarily available. 'I regard my election as a direct compliment to Charlotte Maxeke and its staff, for the work they've achieved and I'm looking forward to working with my colleagues to broaden access to surgery,' he added.

Gauteng's Health and Social Development MEC Qedani Mahlangu congratulated Boffard on his election, describing it as 'proof' of the calibre of health professionals working in the public health sector in Gauteng. The society represents surgeons in 108 countries and is based in Switzerland. Boffard trained for medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand and at one stage worked in the UK before returning to South Africa. He is currently Chief Specialist and Clinical Head of the surgery department at the hospital, as well as at the University of the Witwatersrand. His specialties include vascular trauma, critical care, trauma systems and trauma education.

### Crash victim contracts AIDS, wins R2.1 settlement

A 52-year-old mother whose life was changed forever when she contracted HIV from a pedestrian she had hit on the N3 near Mooi River Toll Plaza in August 2000, has won her case against the KwaZulu-Natal Health Department. In his ruling, Judge Shimon Patel said the paramedic had failed to ensure that no contamination occurred in handling the dead pedestrian and the woman. The paramedic should have known that with the high incidence of HIV and two people with open bleeding wounds there was a risk of cross-contamination of blood. He should have taken all precautions.

The Gauteng woman sued the department for R2.1 million in the Pietermaritzburg High Court. She alleged that paramedics from the provincial ambulance service were negligent, causing her to contract HIV from the pedestrian killed in the accident. In his ruling, Judge Shimon Patel said the paramedic had failed to ensure that no contamination occurred in handling the dead pedestrian and the woman.

### Traditional leaders discuss circumcision

More than 100 traditional heads and government leaders gathered at Pietermaritzburg's Royal Show Grounds in January to discuss reviving the custom of male circumcision (MC) to prevent the spread of HIV. The KwaZulu-Natal government recently decided to throw its weight behind Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini's plan to revive the custom which was abandoned by the Zulus decades ago.

In the documents circulated before the start of the workshop, provincial government said a number of studies had shown that while MC did not provide complete protection against HIV infection, it lowered the risk of heterosexual HIV transmission. The workshop was attended by premier Zweli Mkhize, health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, corporate governance MEC Nomusa Dube and Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

A 2005 study in South Africa found that MC reduced the risk of acquiring HIV infection by 60%. Two studies in Uganda produced similar results. After 2 years of consultation and scientific briefings of stakeholders the South African National AIDS Council has prepared MC guidelines while the health department is busy with a feasibility study and cost analysis. MC will be part of a comprehensive new HIV prevention package due out later this year, officials have confirmed. Head of the National Health Insurance (NHI) task team, Dr Olive Shisana, has additionally said that MC will almost certainly be part of the benefit package her 28-member expert team is preparing for legislation this June.

A modelling exercise by Johns Hopkins University academics suggests that scale-up of MC coverage to 80% of men and neonates in South Africa over the next 5 years will avert more than 1 million new HIV infections by 2025.

### **Fake healers – DA concerned**

The Medicines Control Council needs to say what it is doing to root out people offering bogus 'miracle' cures for ailments, the Democratic Alliance (DA) said last month. 'The DA will be asking detailed questions about what the MCC's law enforcement division has actually done to put a stop to the flood of fraudsters dispensing medicine and trying to trick South Africans out of their money,' MP Mike Waters said. He said countless numbers of people made such claims on street corners and in newspapers across the country every day. 'These bogus doctors can freely act in direct contravention of the law, even advertising their products in national

newspapers,' he continued. HIV and AIDS was a special focus of such people, who played on the 'atmosphere of suspicion of conventional therapies created by former health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, and because there are hundreds of thousands of people who are infected with HIV and desperate for answers.'

The Medicines and Related Substances Control Act makes the MCC responsible for ensuring that only people licensed in terms of the Pharmacy Act are allowed to dispense medicine. The 'days of AIDS dissidence' were gone but, said the DA, the MCC had not 'caught up'. An MCC spokesperson was not immediately available to comment.

### **Change on the cards for medical parole law**

The country's laws that govern medical parole are up for a major overhaul, if the recommendations by a task team currently reviewing the medical parole policy are supported by Parliament. The team, led by well-known law expert, Judge Siraj Desai, released its draft report last month recommending that certain changes be made, particularly to Section 79 of the Correctional Services Act. It recommended, among other things, that a parole be reviewed anytime should an offender's health improve while they are out on medical parole. Correctional Services Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula appointed the task team after loopholes were spotted in the Act. One of the challenges in the application of the Act was the fact that medical practitioners found it difficult to classify all inmates as 'being in the final phase of any terminal disease or condition.'

This has led to many bedridden inmates ending up failing to qualify for placement on parole under the provision of the law. 'This is despite that their human dignity was seriously impaired by their continued incarceration in such circumstances,' said Mapisa-Nqakula.

At least 74 deaths had been reported in SA's prisons since 1 January this year.

Also in terms of the current legislation, it was difficult to bring offenders back to correctional facilities should their condition drastically improve. 'In terms of the current legislation it is not clear how to determine qualifying people to be released on medical parole,' the minister said.

A fierce debate is still raging following the release of convicted fraudster Shabir Shaik last year after serving only two of his 15-year prison term. 'A number of questions have been asked about the decisions we have made as the department in releasing people on medical parole,' Mapisa-Nqakula said. The recommendations will be sent to Parliament once all the stakeholders have had an opportunity to air their views.

### **Hospital scores reprieve from health chiefs**

The Health Department last month threw Durban's Addington Hospital a lifeline by unfreezing 52 posts to boost low staff numbers which had resulted in some departments temporarily closing down. Early this year the hospital closed its children's outpatients department, which treats on average 160 children a day. At the time, the paediatric ward was operating with four doctors as opposed to the required 10. The staff shortage was linked to a cost-cutting moratorium on all posts announced by the KZN Health Department last year. Addington's paediatric staff applied for posts in the unit to be unfrozen in June last year.

Health Department spokesperson Chris Maxon said Addington had applied for a total of 96 posts to be unfrozen, of which 52 could now be filled. 'The unfrozen posts include doctors, and nursing and allied health professionals,' he said. Maxon said the department was considering applications from several institutions to unfreeze posts. 'The applications are being considered and will be unfrozen based on the needs of districts. Our greatest area of focus is the clinical services, where we are faced with greater pressures.'

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