

NEWS BITES

INTERNATIONAL

State's attitude to HIV/AIDS slammed in Toronto

UN special envoy to Africa, Stephen Lewis, accused the South African government of expounding HIV/AIDS theories 'more worthy of a lunatic fringe than a concerned and compassionate state', at the International AIDS Conference's closing session this August.

Lewis hauled the country over the coals in front of more than 20 000 delegates during his address on the importance of treatment. 'Between 600 and 800 people a day die of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. The government has a lot to atone for,' Lewis said to deafening applause.

'It is the only country in Africa, among all the country's I have traversed in the past five years, whose government is still obtuse, dilatory and negligent about rolling out treatment,' said Lewis. The ANC labelled his statements 'unacceptable'.

Short circuit in brain could lead to schizophrenia

People with schizophrenia may develop the first signs in late adolescence, but a new study suggests that the trigger for the mind-altering disorder may actually be laid down at birth, through an alteration of genes involved in insulating the brain's wiring. The brain consists of grey matter and white matter. The grey matter houses the neurons, the white matter contains the long axon projections that control messages sent to and from the brain. Without insulation on these projections brain cells fail to communicate effectively. The resulting cross-talk may explain why schizophrenics have disturbances in emotion, social functioning, thinking and perceiving information.

Scientists head for the woods

North Korea sent its scientists into the woods to search for a cure for heart and blood diseases through the healing power of blueberries. The fruit's effectiveness in 'lowering cholesterol content in the blood vessels, liver and kidney and preventing and curing heart and blood diseases' was reported by a Korean news agency. The report said the berry could treat internal diseases and remove poisoning by heavy metals.

'Donors not making the grade'

Most G8 countries are renegeing on financial commitments to support the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, according to a report card released at the

International AIDS Conference in Toronto, Canada, in August. The findings, prepared by an alliance of health advocacy groups, graded 22 of the wealthiest countries on pledges made to the Global Fund for 2006 and 2007. Only France, Ireland and Sweden received A grades for both years, while Germany, Japan, Australia and Switzerland were among nine countries that received two years of failing grades. The grades were determined by calculating a country's 'fair share' of contributions based on its gross national income (GNI) as a percentage of world GNI. An F grade was assigned to countries that pledged less than 50% of their fair share.

AFRICA

New HIV/AIDS prevention approaches urged

The three key priority HIV/AIDS interventions recommended by a South African Development Community think tank meeting in Maseru earlier this year, based on the best available evidence, are the following: (i) Significantly *reduce multiple, concurrent partnerships* for both men and women. Explore possibilities for mass campaigns or social movements with strong political, religious and community leadership (both top down and bottom up) and endorsed by the mass media to stigmatise and discourage multiple partnerships as a threat to individual and public health. (ii) Prepare for potential national rollout of *male circumcision* through acceptability, feasibility and costing studies depending on the readiness of individual countries, and/or the outcome of the Kenya and Uganda randomised controlled trials of male circumcision. Male circumcision should be embedded within a broader context of strengthening male sexual and reproductive health (SRH): STI treatment, condom use, and counselling and testing for HIV. (iii) Address gender inequalities, especially from the perspective of *male involvement and responsibility* for SRH and HIV prevention and support. The specific objective should be to reduce multiple, concurrent partnerships, intergenerational/age-disparate sex and sexual violence through multiple channels.

SOUTH AFRICA

Dr Kgosi Letlape, chairperson of the South African Medical Association, said it was 'regrettable' that the Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, continued to misrepresent the facts about the role of nutrition in the management of AIDS.

'The medical profession fully acknowledges the known fact that optimal nutrition is important and beneficial to everybody. However, her emphasis of the exaggerated value of nutrition as a preferential means to manage and treat AIDS is confusing a vulnerable public.'

Any claims of therapeutic effectiveness being made, without appropriate clinical trials and subsequent submission to and approval by the Medicines Control Council, were against the law. He 'implored' the Minister to refrain from breaking the law.

'There is no current scientifically proven alternative to ARVs in the treatment of AIDS patients with weakened immune systems. The public should no longer be subjected to ambiguous advice and confusing statements. In the interest of better health care for our people, SAMA is appealing to the Minister to refrain from confusing the public about the value of nutrition as opposed to scientific and evidence-based medicine,' Letlape said.

State defies the courts, angers judge

In the most far-reaching criticism of government behaviour around HIV/AIDS yet made, Durban High Court Judge Nicholson on 28 August found the State in contempt for not carrying out an interim order to provide ARVs to Westville Prison inmates.

'If the refusal to comply does not result from instruction from the first respondent (the Government of the Republic of South Africa), then the remaining respondents must be disciplined, either administratively or in an employment context, for their delinquency. If the government has given such an instruction then we face a grave constitutional crisis involving a serious threat to the doctrine of the separation of powers. *Should that continue, the members of the judiciary will have to consider whether their oath of office requires them to continue on the bench.*'

Judge Nicholson quoted extensively from the affidavit of TAC KwaZulu-Natal Treatment Project Co-ordinator Sindi Blose who described the 'tragic and unnecessary' death of applicant MM. MM's CD4 count was 87 in November 2004 and he was placed on treatment only in July 2006, weeks before his death and far too late, after he had suffered from 'bleeding piles, painful rash on both ears, fungal infections, TB, body rash, general itchiness, oral thrush, penile sores, mouth sores, septic sores on knees, painful feet'.

Blose further stated (as quoted by Judge Nicholson) 'The respondents should not be allowed to abuse the process of the Courts by defeating the very purpose of the order that was granted on 26 July 2006 ... While the respondents attempt to out-manoeuvre the Courts and delay the exercise of the prisoners' right to adequate medical treatment, the prisoners are dying. The case is as simple, and tragic, as that.'

TAC said afterwards that the government was 'attempting to undermine the judicial system in the same way that it has destroyed the integrity of independent statutory bodies such as the Medicines Control Council, the Medical Research Council and the Health Professions Council of South Africa'.

Abortion legislation invalid, says court

An amendment to the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, which extended the range of health practitioners able to conduct abortions, was declared invalid by the Constitutional Court in mid-August on the grounds that Parliament had not sufficiently involved the public in the drafting of the Bill. The Traditional Health Practitioners Act, which gave traditional healers the same status as medical doctors, was invalidated for the same reason. Anti-abortion group Doctors for Life (DFL) International, who brought the application directly to the Constitutional Court, welcomed the judgement, calling it a 'historic victory'.

Iran docs for Rustenburg

Sixteen Iranian doctors arrived in Rustenburg at the end of August to start work in under-staffed rural hospitals and clinics in the North West. The problem came to a head recently with reports that Brits Hospital was facing virtual collapse. It had only 10 doctors and 23 nurses. The doctors will be posted to rural and poor communities in the province.

'Need for speed' as RAF rues R18 billion deficit

Lawyers and foreigners were blamed for the Road Accident Fund's (RAF's) R18 billion deficit when the fund's top executives appeared before Parliament to lobby for legislative changes.

They had the ear of MPs on the National Council of Provinces' public service committee, who were of the view that, with the World Cup around the corner, a speedy solution to the problem was necessary. One MP noted that if international footballers were injured in car accidents here 'South Africa could be bankrupted'. 'We need to do it quickly, otherwise this country will be bankrupted by foreigners and lawyers', ANC MP Cornelius van Rooyen said.

The fund has paid out R1.3 billion in legal fees this financial year, excluding contingency fees – in stark contrast to the R355 million it paid out in medical expenses or the R1 billion for loss of income. More than R200 million in claims has been paid to foreigners this year.

The RAF board has identified systemic corruption as the main cause of its poor financial position, aggravated by an inadequate funding policy.

Chris Bateman