

HIV/AIDS – let us stop the madness!

About 18 months ago Fortune magazine published an article about the (then) extremely overheated stock market, entitled "Have the markets gone mad?" We all know what happened since then to the markets, especially after September 11, 2001. Madness was met by madness, or so it seems. There is an analogy to the madness on HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa.

A few days ago I read in the newspapers the sad news that Zackie Achmat, the inspiring campaigner of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), although desperately sick with AIDS, is refusing to take anti-retroviral treatment in sympathy with the patients, who are dependant on the health services of the public sector, who are denied access to anti-retrovirals by current government policies. In the same newspaper it was also reported that our minister of health has stated that anti-retroviral medication is "poison," and that she was blocking international donor funds in KwaZulu-Natal earmarked for AIDS relief, because of "administrative irregularities". A few days later there was another newspaper report about a research project conducted in Senegal by De la Porte et al proving that anti-retrovirals are indeed "just as effective in an African population as in western populations." Dr. Thys van Mollendorf, the medical superintendent of the Rob Ferreira hospital, was sacked a couple of weeks ago by the MEC for Health in Mpumalanga because he allowed a NGO to issue anti-retrovirals to rape survivors in his hospital. The Constitutional Court ordered the government to provide nevirapine to all HIV+ pregnant mothers in public health facilities, in

order to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Ping-pong?

Reading this one might rightfully ask: "Have the politicians (and we) gone completely mad?" How can it be that a democratically elected government, a government by the people for the people, in a country already buckling under the burden of HIV, go so completely against the best interest of its own people, driving its citizens to open resistance in the highest court of the land and resorting to risking their own lives to make their point?

The new African Union (AU) was launched a short while ago in Durban amidst much fanfare, with NEPAD (the New Partnership for African Development) hailed as one of its cornerstones. This document talks about ideals such as: an annual growth rate of 7% for fifteen years; cutting poverty in half by the year 2015; reduce infant mortality rates by two-thirds; reduce maternal mortality rates to three-quarters of what they were before; have every child enter school who is eligible, thereby re-enforcing the principle of gender equality. A more praiseworthy agenda could probably not be imagined. It also talks about free trade, promoting investment, good governance, and fighting corruption. However, somewhat hidden amongst all these great ideals, paragraph 125 states: "One of the major impediments facing African development efforts is the widespread incidence of communicable diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Unless these epidemics are brought under control, real gains in human development will remain an impossible hope."

Apart from the suffering in South Africa (and Sub-Saharan Africa) because of HIV/AIDS, presently and yet to come, the pandemic is clearly threatening all the ideals of the AU, NEPAD and the "African Renaissance". If we do not deal effectively with HIV/AIDS all this will become a pipedream, once again.

We know how to deal with HIV/AIDS – voluntary counselling and testing; the prevention of mother-to-child transmission; anti-retroviral treatment to keep people alive; and prevention, particularly in the key youth group aged 15 to 24 through peer counselling and peer education. However, it will first require commitment by African governments and donor countries alike. In South Africa it will also require an end to denial. Our government must first openly and unequivocally rise above this denial. The G8 countries cannot afford the developing world to sink further into the abyss of poverty and suffering, as it will eventually pull them down into that same hole as well. They can commit the funds to help fund the fight against HIV and stop the hypocrisy about promoting free trade whilst pumping billions of dollars into subsidies for farmers and other key industries in their own countries, denying Africa a fair chance.

And Zackie Achmat, well, maybe he will serve his country and AIDS sufferers better by taking the anti-retrovirals that will keep him alive, and once again prove that despite side effects they can keep you alive. Live Zackie! Let us stop this madness!

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