HIV in South Africa: what do the statistics show?

In his presentation last week, Minister of Health Motsoaledi presented a troubling picture of the HIV epidemic showing our failure as a country to turn the tide against this unrelenting virus. Quoting data from STATS SA, Department of Health, Department of Home Affairs, World Health Organisation, Medical Research Council (MRC), Human Science Research Council (HSRC), and a series of articles on Health in South Africa published in the prestigious medical journal The Lancet, he described how HIV has spread to every corner of our country, has impacted on TB and the health services, and dramatically shortened life expectancy. The central point was that an unacceptably large number of South Africans have not been able to realise their dream of a better life in a free and democratic South Africa due to the scourge of AIDS and that this situation cannot be allowed to continue any longer.

In subsequent media reports, the accuracy of one of the multitude of statistics he presented, namely, the number of people who died in South Africa in 2008 as reported by the Department of Home Affairs, has been called into question. Additionally, an outrageous accusation was leveled that this 2008 number of deaths was deliberately exaggerated because "big AIDS numbers are good for business", as if the scale of the AIDS devastation needs to be artificially inflated and overstated for it to be taken seriously. As a vivid reminder of the cynical questioning of AIDS-related mortality we have witnessed in the past, the seeds of doubt are ever-present regarding the extent to which AIDS mortality is increasing or decreasing and which one of the many death rates most accurately reflects the South African reality. Each one of us, as doctors and scientists who deal with HIV on a daily basis in this country, sees the pain, knows the suffering, is aware of the premature loss of life and unequivocally appreciates that AIDS is the number one cause of death in South Africa.

We have been conducting research on the HIV epidemic and have through our studies been able to develop the following picture of our country's HIV epidemic:

1. With only 0.7% of the world’s population, South Africa has 17% of the world’s HIV/AIDS cases – the greatest burden of HIV infection in the world.
2. It is estimated that about 5.4 million people were HIV infected in South Africa in 2006. The worst affected province is KwaZulu-Natal and the country’s least affected province is the Western Cape.

3. From 2006 to 2008, 29% of pregnant women were HIV positive with little change (range 29.1 to 29.4) over these last 3 years (Figure 1).

4. New HIV infections continued to occur at a steady rate over the last 3 years (in KwaZulu-Natal, the HIV incidence rate was about 5% in 2006 to 2008), indicating the lack of impact of prevention efforts during this period.

5. The number of deaths in our country has risen substantially from 1998 to 2006; with AIDS largely responsible for the substantial increase in deaths of young adults. The increase over the 9 years is evident regardless of whether data are from Stats SA or Home Affairs (Figure 2). By 2007/8, the antiretroviral rollout had reached sizeable numbers of AIDS patients who would otherwise have died, and so we hope to see a subsequent drop in mortality. At this time, the available data provide some hopeful hints that mortality may be dropping due to the antiretroviral rollout programme but it is too early to draw definitive conclusions. In this context, the Home Affairs number of deaths for 2008 can only be regarded as preliminary and needs to be verified.

6. HIV/AIDS has taken South Africa off track in the quest to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is going to be very difficult for our country to reach the targets of MDG 4 to reduce child deaths by two thirds and MDG5 to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters by 2015 when both maternal mortality rates and the high death rates in children below 5 years increased over the last 10 years, mainly due to the impact of HIV infection.

In short, the available information point indisputably to the heavy toll imposed by HIV/AIDS on South Africa with unacceptably high rates of HIV infection and AIDS mortality - the clarion call to action is loud and clear. The opportunity to impede the further spread of HIV and halt further deaths from AIDS is available to all of us as a nation. With committed leadership and evidence-based action, defeating this epidemic is within our grasp. The need for concerted effort from every one of us has never been more critical.
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