



Press release

COMBATING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IS VITAL TO IMPROVING ACCESS TO HIV/AIDS CARE, SAY UNAIDS AND WHO

40% of countries have yet to adopt anti-discrimination laws to protect people living with HIV/AIDS

Kampala, Uganda, 26 October 2003 — Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS must be eradicated as a critical component of expanding access to treatment and care, according to UNAIDS and WHO.

“It is a serious injustice to see that only 1 percent of the 4.1 million people in sub-Saharan Africa who need antiretroviral therapy have access to it,” said Ben Plumley, Chief, Executive Office at the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), speaking at the opening of the 11th International Conference for People Living with HIV/AIDS. “As we work together to close this vast treatment gap, we must also tackle the intolerance and fear that prevents people from accessing the services they need.”

Last month, UNAIDS presented to the UN General Assembly a global report card on progress made in implementing the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, which was unanimously adopted by all UN member states in 2001. Despite some progress, critical gaps continue to exist, particularly in access to HIV medicines and efforts to combat stigma and discrimination and protect the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS.

According to the UNAIDS progress report, close to 40% of countries, including half of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, have yet to adopt anti-discrimination legislation to protect people living with HIV/AIDS. “Governments must recognize that developing laws that protect the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS is essential to an effective response to the epidemic,” added Mr Plumley.

Prevention and treatment are both essential for controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS. The availability of ARV therapy makes it more likely that people will come forward for HIV testing, learn their status, receive counseling and care and become knowledgeable about preventing the spread of the virus. To address the failure to deliver ARV treatment, WHO is leading an emergency “3 by 5” response with UNAIDS and other partners to get three million people on treatment by 2005. Currently only around 300,000 have access.

“Even in the poorest settings treatment works, reduces discrimination and brings hope. Affected communities and people living with HIV have a key role to play to

both mobilize political commitment for basic rights and to provide care," said Ian Grubb, WHO's HIV Human Rights Officer.

Under the theme of "The Dawn of New Positive Leadership", the conference will focus primarily on the important role people living with HIV/AIDS can play as leaders in prevention and treatment access. HIV-positive people have already made substantial progress in many aspects of the AIDS fight – formed community groups providing home-based care, worked through the media and the law courts to extend access to HIV drugs, and set up national, regional and international networks of HIV-positive people. "People living with HIV/AIDS have always been on the frontline of prevention and care strategies. This conference will identify new approaches to ensure that national AIDS action strategies can fully benefit from the unique contribution of affected communities", added Mr Plumley.

The Conference for People Living with HIV/AIDS, being held from 26-30 October, will also focus on treatment preparedness and literacy, family, youth and children issues and stigma and discrimination. It is organized by the Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GNP+), and the National Guidance and Empowerment Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda (NGEN+). About 800 participants from around the world are expected to attend, of which 200 are from Uganda.

Of the 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide, over 29 million live in sub-Saharan Africa.

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