

'ART necessary for CD4 count above 500'

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EXPERTS and civil society organisations have appealed to the government to up its ante in tackling HIV-Aids.

The appeal comes as debates on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and post-2015 development agenda continue in many countries. The MDGs, which expire this year, will be replaced by what will be known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs are a new set of goals and targets UN member states are expected to aspire towards in the next 15 years.

MDGs set two targets for the disease in 2000: "halting and reversing the spread of HIV-Aids by 2015 and achieving universal access to treatment by 2010".

According to the UN, even when 9.7 million people in low- and middle-income countries were accessing antiretroviral therapy (ART), the 2010 target of universal access was not reached.

The Copenhagen Consensus Centre has proposed that for the upcoming SDG targets, countries should increase the number of people on ART. It said that South Africa should aim to treat 90% of people, focusing more on patients with the lowest CD4 count and also extend the treatment to patients whose CD4 count is above 500.

Head of policy at the Treatment Action Campaign, Marcus Low, said there was evidence that extending treatment to patients with CD4 counts above 500 was in their best interest.



PREEMPTIVE: People should be offered ARVs when their CD4 count climbs. PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK

He said that the government should ensure that those on ART should receive quality treatment before extending it to others.

"There's convincing evidence that patients should be offered ARVs when their CD 4 count is higher, that is in the best interest of the patients," Low said.

When asked if extending ART treatment to patients whose CD 4 count was above 500 was realistic for a developing country like South Africa, he said: "If there's political will and the national Treasury makes the funds available, it can happen."

Low said that it was important to ensure that patients who begin the treatment don't end up leaving it because of

challenges such as the shortage of drugs in some health care institutions.

"We want ambitious targets on HIV-Aids, TB and malaria. Every person who needs treatment for HIV should be able to access it," Low said.

Thula Mdlalose, a 37-year-old woman from Daveyton, said her CD 4 count was above 750 when she began taking ART when she was pregnant in 2013.

"I tested HIV positive when I was pregnant and the nurses suggested that I start taking treatment. They told me they were trying to protect my unborn baby."

Mdlalose said that she was taken off the ART treatment for six months after giving birth.

She thereafter started getting headaches and meningitis.

She only became better when she was given the drugs again last year. "My CD4 count started rising again when I restarted the drugs and now it's over 100. I have not been sick again," she said.

A recent trial by the Strategic Timing of Antiretroviral Treatment revealed that it was better for HIV-positive people to begin treatment while their CD4 count was above 500 cells/mm³.

It said that they should not wait until it dropped below 350.

On the calls to extend the treatment to patients whose CD 4 count is above 500, ministry of health spokesperson Joe Maila said it was too early to com-



TAKE CARE: A target of 10 million Aids patients treated by 2020 has been set. PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK

ment on the proposal.

"These are still proposals and it would be premature to start talking about them," he said.

"But we can say that when it comes to such, we have always taken the cue from the World Health Organisation but we will look at them closely."

Maila said the department was aiming to increase the number of HIV patients in 2016.

"We want to expand our treatment to 90%. By next year our target is to treat 4.6 million people. We want those who don't know their status to get tested."

The health department spends billions of rands a year on the ART programme.

South Africa has the biggest pro-

gramme in the world. Of the more than 6.3 million South Africans living with HIV-Aids, more than 3 million are on the ART programme.

The chief of global advocacy and policy for the Aids Healthcare foundation, Terri Ford, said that with more than 35 million people living with HIV-Aids globally, 2.4 million people still do not have access to any ART treatment.

Governments should aim to treat another 10 million patients by 2020.

"We believe reaching the next 10 million by 2020 should be easier. It is still ambitious, but definitely an achievable goal. And a matter of life and death for millions," Ford said.

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