

■ **New Trends in HIV Management**

HIV is now a preventable and relatively easily treatable chronic infection. A patient adhering to their treatment regime and receiving optimal care, can look forward to a near-normal lifespan. Current treatment options are far simpler, more effective and less toxic than ever before.

What are some of the contributing factors to the positive and significant progress made in terms of managing HIV today?

Advances in prevention - prevention methods today, encompass more than simply abstinence or condomisation. Male circumcision is now believed to greatly reduce the chances of HIV transmission and is encouraged in adult males who were not circumcised at birth.

In addition, researchers have achieved an important scientific breakthrough in the fight against HIV with a vaginal gel that significantly reduces a woman's risk of being infected with the virus.

Aggressive prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission has high impact results and is very cost effective.

Studies have found that transmission of the virus from an HIV positive person who is adherent to appropriate antiretroviral therapy (ART), is greatly reduced (some studies indicate by as much as 92% less). This is because the ART can lower the viral load in the blood and genital secretions, to an undetectable level, thus making the individual much less likely to pass the virus on. This is referred to as “treatment as prevention” and highlights the need for people living with HIV to seek out appropriate care and stick to their treatment.

Advances in HIV testing – funders, including Government, medical aids and corporations, have seen the value of including HIV testing within “wellness” assessments to improve uptake.

Testing of couples is now widely encouraged where appropriate. This couples approach is believed to make a big difference in terms of encouraging the need to know one’s HIV status and inviting responsible and open communication between couples regarding their sexual behaviour.

The simplicity and accuracy of the tests available today also contribute greatly to the success of mobilising people to get tested.

Aid for AIDS has introduced a powerful tool into their HIV Counselling and Testing (HCT) campaigns in order to ensure that individuals who test positive, are immediately enrolled on the Disease Management Programme. This is done by means of a pre-registration process at the point of diagnosis and gives the individual an opportunity to access care and support, and when appropriate, treatment for their condition.

Advances in therapy – treatment of HIV today is simpler, better and faster. This is made possible by new formulations (e.g. a 3-in-1 daily tablet (Atripla®)), the availability of many low cost generics and a host of refinements to existing drugs and clinical profiles, based on substantial advancements in understanding how to manage the virus.

Better understanding of disease progression and impact of ART – thanks to research and experience, a number of issues in this regard are better understood. For example, untreated HIV is associated with an increased risk of non-HIV (especially cardiovascular) disease and premature ageing.

The benefits of starting ART earlier are now clearly established.

Use of ART in pregnancy, children, adolescents and the elderly is now also better understood.

Conclusion

So, this is the good news that allows us to make the encouraging statement at the beginning of this article that HIV is now a preventable and relatively easily treatable chronic infection. But there are still challenges to be faced:

- Many people still do not know their HIV status
- Stigma and denial persist (although progress has been made)
- Behavioral change (reduction in number of sexual partners, delaying the sexual debut, encouraging safer sex, etc) – is an uphill battle
- Encouraging patients to stay adherent to their treatment
- Tuberculosis and Hepatitis B virus co-infection with HIV



Nonetheless, a retrospective look at the incredible progress that's been made with regards to managing HIV in the last 12 years, is certainly enough to justify a positive outlook on the prospects of future progress.

The role of Aid for AIDS as a disease manager over that period of time, has positively impacted directly on the lives of more than 165,000 HIV positive patients. The value of the benefits derived from well managed patients on the programme, extend to their families and ultimately their communities as well. AfA look to the future determined to continue our leading role in the response to HIV in the private sector in South Africa.