

World AIDS Day 2011 – Getting to Zero

Aid for AIDS is South Africa's largest HIV disease manager in the private sector. We have the responsibility of managing the care and treatment of over 110,000 people living with HIV. Each year that World AIDS Day comes around, as an organization we are reminded of the individual lives we touch on a daily basis. We are continuously focusing our efforts to keep improving the physical health status of our members through clinical excellence, as well as the other forms of support we provide them in order to stay committed to their treatment.

The international theme for World AIDS Day 2011 is "Getting to Zero". Backed by the United Nations the "Getting to Zero" campaign runs until 2015 and essentially aspires to zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS related deaths. This is quite obviously a message that Aid for AIDS wholeheartedly supports.

According to UNAIDS, there are 10 concrete milestones which have been laid out as goals to achieve under this theme, by 2015.

1. Sexual transmission of HIV reduced by half, including among young people, men who have sex with men and transmission in the context of sex work;
2. Vertical transmission of HIV eliminated (this means mother to child transmission) and AIDS-related maternal deaths reduced by half;
3. All new HIV infections prevented among people who use drugs.
4. Universal access to antiretroviral therapy for people living with HIV who are eligible for treatment;
5. TB deaths among people living with HIV reduced by half;
6. All people living with HIV and households affected by HIV are addressed in all national social protection strategies and have access to essential care and support.
7. Countries with punitive laws and practises around HIV transmission, sex work, drug use or homosexuality that block effective responses reduced by half ;
8. HIV-related restrictions on entry, stay and residence eliminated in half of the countries that have such restrictions;
9. HIV-specific needs of women and girls are addressed in at least half of all national HIV responses;

10. Zero tolerance for gender-based violence.

Aid for AIDS consider it a privilege to have been at the forefront of HIV disease management within what is the epicenter of the epidemic. Although we continuously improve on what we are doing, our experience and expertise help us understand what is required to achieve the aspirations of this year's World AIDS Day theme. We believe our programme is well equipped to do just this.

By enrolling on the Aid for AIDS programme, members gain access to a wide range of benefits which are funded within the benefit structure of their scheme. There is an unfortunate perception that these benefits are limited to medicines to treat HIV and opportunistic infections. The truth is that providing clinically appropriate treatment regimes for people living with HIV is only a part of effectively managing their condition.

It is vitally important that a person living with HIV enroll on the programme at the very earliest time after diagnosis. This may in fact be long before their health status requires antiretroviral medicine. By enrolling early, members gain access to empowering support and guidance from our treatment support staff. They are a highly skilled and compassionate team who understand the complexities and the challenges facing a person living with HIV. They can thus be invaluable in preparing a person mentally and emotionally for the journey ahead.

Early enrolment also means a person living with HIV is well placed to be introduced to treatment **at the right time**. This is critical for improving the effectiveness of the medicine and will have a significant impact on their overall health and quality of life.

Interestingly, 2011 also marks 20 years since Magic Johnson first told the world he was HIV positive. The fact that Mr Johnson is leading a healthy and productive life 20 years on, should be a huge source of hope to anyone living with the virus. . Although there are a number of challenges during the journey, his story can teach us valuable lessons about what is required to ensure that HIV is no more than a manageable chronic disease. In short, these can be summed up as follows:

1. Get tested and know your status! This applies to each and every one of us. Magic Johnson was not part of what is perceived to be a "typical" group of people to be living with the virus. HIV can infect anyone. Positive or negative; knowledge of your status is power over your future.
2. If you test HIV positive, accept you may encounter challenges during your journey but seek support from places that offer it. This is one of the fundamental and most valuable benefits available to all patients enrolled on the Aid for AIDS programme. Have faith that with the help on offer, you can be fortified to face those challenges and live your life positively.

3. Once your condition reaches a stage where you require antiretrovirals, stick to your treatment regime unwaveringly. Magic Johnson has made no secret of the fact that he is on antiretroviral treatment and he sticks to it!

4. Live positively! Eat healthy, exercise, manage your stress levels.

In an interview in TIME Magazine a few years ago, in answer to the question “How is it that you’re still alive?”, Magic’s response was “Well, taking my meds and working out every day. Having a positive attitude. And early detection--we caught it early on. That's why we're always encouraging young people to go get tested. Because the earlier you find out anything--it's not just HIV and AIDS, it's cancer, whatever it is--those doctors can jump on it right away and help save your life.”

Aid for AIDS encourages all South Africans to take to heart the aspirational theme for this year’s World AIDS Day. Be part of **Getting to Zero**. Whether you’re living with HIV or not, each of us has a contribution to make in achieving zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS related deaths.

If you have any questions or need confidential advice about HIV/AIDS, please contact **Aid for AIDS** on **0860 100 646**.