

Antiretrovirals Give Life

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The Faculty of Health Sciences of Wits University would like to take the occasion of World AIDS Day 2005 to publicly share its positive experiences with the use of anti-retroviral therapy (ART) for HIV/AIDS. "This is important in the light of ongoing public confusion and fear surrounding ART, which we believe may prevent people from making use of life saving medication that is increasingly available in the Gauteng province," says Prof. Max Price, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Faculty doctors working in public hospitals have been closely associated with the Gauteng Provincial ART programme since its inception in April 2004 and are collectively following up more than 10,000 people on ART. "The results are dramatic and unequivocal, says Dr Francois Venter, an HIV clinician who works at the Johannesburg Hospital and who is currently President of the Southern African HIV Clinicians Society. "At Johannesburg Hospital, out of every 100 of patients started on ART, 90 are able to return to work and family life within months. In the era before ART was made available, of these 100 patients, 40 would have died and another 40 would have become severely ill within one year," he says. Findings are similar across all the ART treatment sites where Faculty doctors are involved.

Positive personal testimonies of people on the public sector ART programme have been found at the Harriet Shezi Children's HIV clinic at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital. "Every life saved is a household spared the devastating loss of a parent, a bread-winner or a child. We strongly encourage all people living with HIV to seek care from health facilities in the Province to enable them to make an informed choice about whether to start treatment and to find out how and where they can obtain treatment for HIV," says Dr Tammy Meyers, the paediatrician in charge of this clinic.

The Faculty would further like to express its dismay over the lack of national consensus on appropriate treatment for HIV. In this respect, Prof. Helen Schneider, Chair of the Health Faculty's AIDS Committee reaffirmed the statement made by the Wits Vice-Chancellor, Professor Loyiso Nongxa two months ago in which the University called for a speedy investigation into the trials allegedly being conducted by the Rath Foundation. Dr Rath has criticised ART as dangerous and is apparently testing high dose vitamin supplements for the treatment of HIV without obtaining ethical clearance. "There has been no conclusion to the investigation of the validity and ethics of the Rath trials. Instead we have seen a proliferation of law-suits by Dr Rath against respected journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations," says Schneider. "The effects of this are to sow mistrust and confusion in the public's mind."

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