

TAC's 5th National Congress: The struggle for treatment is far from over

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The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) held its 5th National Congress on 21 and 22 October at the Birchwood Conference Center in Johannesburg. The conference was attended by 290 voting delegates from seven provinces across the country (KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng and the Free State), sixty observers from partner organisations, regional activists from Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, and some of TAC's funders.

TAC's first National Congress was held in Soweto in 2001. That congress took place in the early years of former President Thabo Mbeki and former Health Minister Manto-Tshabalala Msimang's deadly AIDS denialism. In this dark decade of denialism, TAC and South Africa witnessed over 300,000 avoidable deaths due to delays in making antiretroviral medicines available in the public health system.

Today we are embarking on a new era in South Africa's history with a government that is leading the fight against HIV/AIDS. Today South Africa has over 1.2 million people on treatment.

However, South Africa and the region continues to face huge challenges ahead and TAC's work is far from done. Another 1 million people in South Africa need treatment right now. Over 5 million people in the country are living with HIV and will eventually need treatment. The HIV infection rate also remains unacceptably high. We are failing to meet the National Strategic Plan (NSP) target of reducing new infections by 50%.

Regionally we are doing even worse. Despite the internationally endorsed target to reach universal access by 2010, less than half of people in need are able to access treatment. African and international governments are failing to provide adequate financing to meet the commitments they have made in relation to HIV.

Moving into the next decade, achieving universal access to HIV treatment and prevention remains the top priority for TAC. However, without equitable and properly financed health care, we will not be able to achieve and sustain these targets.

In line with achieving TAC's vision of 'A unified quality health care system which provides equal and affordable access to HIV prevention and treatment services for all people?', members made various resolutions on TAC's strategic focus over the next 5 years. The full list of resolutions will be compiled in TAC's Congress report and will soon be made available on the TAC website.

Key resolutions include the following:

? TAC will increase its efforts in supporting the country on its HIV prevention plans.

? TAC will continue to monitor and support the implementation of the National Strategic Plan and play a leading role in the development of the next National Strategic Plan.

? TAC will call on the South African National AIDS Council to prioritise the development and strengthening of provincial and district AIDS Councils. TAC will play a leading role in establishing and sustaining these councils in the areas that we work.

? TAC welcomes discussions around NHI and will educate branch and community members on NHI once the NHI plan has been made public. TAC supports the development of an effective funding mechanism to achieve equitable and universal access to health care.

? TAC calls on government to take action to resolve the failures of the health system identified in the Integrated Support Team reports.

? TAC will continue to advocate for expanded funding to achieve universal access in the region and will work with partner organisations to mobilise against threats to affordable generic medicine.

During Congress TAC also made resolutions on governance and it was decided that the terms of TAC's National Executive Committee would be extended from 2 to 5 years. Nonkosi Khumalo was re-elected as Chairperson, Vuyiseka Dubula as General Secretary and Nathan Geffen as Treasurer ? all three positions were uncontested. Victor Lakay was elected Deputy Chairperson, Lihle Dlamini as Deputy General Secretary, Nomfundo Eland as Women's Sector representative, and Sydney Makgai as People Living with HIV Sector representative.

TAC received messages of support from our allies, individuals and partner organisations. Messages were sent by Friends of TAC, Bread for the World, Children's Rights Centre, Equal Education, Brothers for Life, Medicins sans Frontieres, the HIV Clinicians Society of Southern Africa, the Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa, Social Equality Leadership School, Equality Project, Habonim Dror, the Center for Economic Governance and AIDS in Africa, Community Media Trust, SECTION27, UNAIDS and AVAC. Greg Gonsalves, Pregs Govender and the Minister of Public Enterprises Barbara Hogan also sent messages of support.

On the eve of the Congress, TAC held an event to celebrate the struggles and battles that have been won over the past decade. During the event speeches were made by Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi, COSATU's General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, High Court Judge Edwin Cameron and TAC's Chairperson Nonkosi Khumalo.

As part of the celebration, TAC launched its soon to be published book: ?Fighting for our lives: The history of the Treatment Action Campaign 1998 ? 2010?. We also aired a 20 minute sneak preview of a film of the history of TAC that is under production by Community Media Trust.

Below is the foreword from the history book that TAC will publish, ?Fighting for our lives: The history of the Treatment Action Campaign?. The foreword is written by TAC's Chairperson Nonkosi Khumalo.

Foreword of ?Fighting for our lives: The history of the Treatment Action Campaign?

Having been in the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) for ten years, I, like many other TAC members, feel that this book cannot have come out at any other time than now. This is because of the rich history that comes with telling the story of this organisation.

When TAC was launched on 10 December 1998, our agenda was to ensure that people living with HIV got access to safe and effective treatment, antiretroviral medicines in particular. These drugs were already available and widely used in developed countries. Sadly, it was not the case in South Africa. Antiretroviral treatment was so expensive that only a few and the rich could afford it. The majority of those living with HIV and in need of treatment were dying because they were too poor to access treatment. This fight was won in courtrooms and in the streets. We paved the way for the state to start providing comprehensive health care services.

But the problem of lack of access to treatment was not just about the price of drugs in South Africa. It was also about the lack of political leadership, starting from the top with ex-President Thabo Mbeki and the Ministry of Health under

the late Minister of Health Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, all the way down to provinces like the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu Natal. Consequently, this meant that no treatment plan was implemented until 2004. And there was no ambitious strategic plan until 2007, when the National Strategic Plan, or NSP as it is popularly called, was adopted by Cabinet. There was almost no access to treatment and there were many unnecessary and avoidable deaths.

South Africa became a playground for all sorts of charlatans who took advantage of the space and, to no surprise, the protection of government. This included people like Matthias Rath and Zeblon Gwala. Court cases and intense community mobilisation became the order of the day in dealing with a non-responsive and arrogant government.

Most importantly for many of us in TAC, this organisation became a centre of learning and leading. It became a home where we learned about politics, leadership, democracy, law and social mobilisation. It became more than just about HIV, but also about access to health care and what section 27 of the Constitution means.

We have combined different tactics such as community mobilisation, the South African Constitution and law, education, research and use of the media to achieve our ends. This is why TAC has transformed many of us in ways we never thought would ever be possible.

I hope that as you read this book you will learn and appreciate this important struggle in our new democracy. I hope too that you will be inspired to go out there and do the same, if not more.

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