

Tackling HIV among adolescents

By JONATHAN MUKUKA

“I WISH to appeal to the Ministry of Health to step up efforts to curb new HIV infections among young people of less than thirty-five years of age who account for eighty-five per cent of Zambia’s population,” said Natasha Mwila, a 28-year-old young woman living with HIV.

Natasha’s remarks were made recently during the commemoration of the HIV Testing Counselling and Treatment Day, which took place at the University of Zambia (UNZA) Great East Road Campus).

The remarks came after Vice-President Mutale Nalumango said an estimated 90, 000 adolescents in Zambia, aged between 10 and 19, were living with HIV.

According to research, the first verified case of HIV was for a blood sample taken in 1959 from a man who was living in what is now Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said two thirds of all 38.4 million People Living With HIV (PLWH) reside in sub-Saharan Africa and as of 2021.

After peaking at 1.7 million in 2004, global AIDS-related deaths fell to a little less than 700, 000 in 2019 and globally, new HIV infections have similarly fallen, from 2.8 million in 1998 to 1.7 million in 2019.

According to WHO, HIV treatment has given hope to millions and what was once a death sentence can now be managed effectively.

In June 2020, 26 million people were accessing life-saving antiretroviral therapy across the globe, a treatment that can give people living with HIV a normal life expectancy.

The second Zambia Population-based HIV and AIDS Impact Assessment (ZAMPHIA) survey conducted between May-December 2021,

revealed that 89 per cent of Zambian adults aged 15 years and older, living with HIV, are aware of their status.

While 98 per cent of those who are aware of their status are on treatment, and that 96 per cent of those on treatment are virally suppressed (meaning a reduction of HIV in the body to low levels where transmission is less likely to occur).

Great strides have been made since the first AIDS cases were recorded, about four decades ago.

The young people of today are the future leaders of tomorrow need to do anything to ensure that there is reduction or a complete halt of new transmission of the deadly virus among the young people.

Natasha, who is the Advocacy and Information Officer for the Network of Zambian People Living with HIV/AIDS, said Zambia is no longer facing drug stock outs and persons living with HIV are able to access multi month treatment for three months and more.

She says there is a need for the Ministry of Health to uphold this best practice if Zambia has to attain the goal of ending AIDS by 2030 and become a nation free from the threat of HIV and AIDS.

Ending AIDS by 2030 is a promise made by Zambia, along with 192 other countries, as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Ending AIDS which was held in 2016.

Natasha says, “I wish to appeal to the Ministry

however, to step up efforts to curb new HIV infections among young people of less than 35 years of age who account for 85 per cent of Zambia’s population. If this is not done as a matter of urgency, we will not reap the anticipated socio-economic benefits from this demographic dividend.”

She said the increase in the new infection among the young people is attributed mainly to the low uptake of HIV preventive interventions including testing services, and poor adherence to treatment.

Natasha added that it is from this year’s HTCT Day held under the theme “Young People Make A Difference, Test for HIV” that they expect the Government to continue with the procurement and provision of HIV testing kits which she said is an entry point to treatment, care and support.

Natasha said Government deserves to be commended for the performance in the provision of HIV services ranging from HIV testing and treatment to viral load testing.

Further, Natasha made a request to the Government to look into the issue of age of consent for the young people to access sexual reproductive and health services as well as HIV services and invest more into the HIV cure research.

“I would like to seize this opportunity to encourage all of you today to test for HIV and know your status in order to contribute to the country’s goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030,” said Natasha.

Kafue district in Lusaka Province is one of the districts with a high HIV infection rate among the youths and adolescents and concerns and appeals from Natasha were taken seriously.

Kafue District

Adolescent Coordinator Charity Bwalya recently also expressed concern with the escalating HIV infections among the Adolescents in the district.

Ms Bwalya, who was speaking during an Adolescent quarterly stakeholders meeting held in the district, said it is worrying that HIV infections and teenage pregnancies continue to rise among young people despite numerous interventions.

Ms Bwalya noted that there is a need to establish why HIV infection keeps rising in the district and to come up with strategies that will help to address the scourge.

“HIV infections have continued to increase despite the interventions that are being done by government and other stakeholders, where is the problem?” asked Ms Bwalya.

Ms Bwalya emphasised the need to educate young girls on the dangers of engaging in illicit sex, drug, and alcohol abuse.

The Kafue District Adolescent Health Champion, Jomo Banda, attributed the rise in HIV infections and teenage pregnancies in the district to poor parenting.

Mr Banda said many parents today are preoccupied with their work at the expense of grooming their children. “We have a lot of absentee parents, and many children are growing up without guidance from their parents.

Mr Banda said some parents do not have time to talk about sexual matters with their children which has led to the escalating number of infections among the adolescents

He called upon parents to take responsibility and educate their children on the dangers of indulging in unlawful and unprotected sex.

Other stakeholders, such as the Kafue Development Aid from People to People



•NATASHA Mwila, Network of Zambian People Living With HIV/AIDS (NZP+) Advocacy and Information Officer.

(DAPP) blamed social media as the lead factor to the high HIV infection rate among the youths and adolescents in the area.

DAPP Programme Officer, Conrad Habasune, said peer pressure and access to social media platforms have contributed to the high levels of HIV infections among the youth

Delivering her keynote speech during the national commemoration of the HTCT Day, Vice-President Mutale Nalumango said there is need to give power to local people to decide on their development needs saying fighting HIV is a high developmental need at all levels.

“I would like to urge our cooperating partners, including all other stakeholders, that we need to continue working together. We need to attain zero stigma and discrimination and increase viral load suppression, as well as improve quality of life for all persons living

with HIV,” the vice-president said.

She called upon the young people to take advantage of the conducive environment provided by the government and other stakeholders, by accessing testing and treatment services.

The vice-president also appealed to parents and guardians to be supportive and ensure that they facilitate children under their care to access HIV testing services.

“As we test for HIV, let us also test for other diseases of public health importance such as sexually transmitted infections and hepatitis and tuberculosis for those with symptoms” she said.

She implored the technocrats under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and the National AIDS Council, to bring forward to government, as policy makers, effective means of reducing the age to consent for HIV

services.

“I know that many of those under the age of 16 years cannot independently access HIV services without consent from parents or guardians. This may be a limiting factor for accessing both prevention and treatment services. Let’s us engage and re-engage all stakeholders for us to provide an enabling environment for reducing HIV infection among the young people,” said Ms Nalumango.

Lusaka Province Minister, Sheal Mulyata said Lusaka Province, with its unique standing, harbours the majority of the population saying it is the heart of social and economic activities in the country.

Ms Mulyata said these factors put together, makes the province to be the centre of transmission of diseases of public health concern including HIV. She says that over the

years, the HIV scourge in the province has continued to affect the vulnerable and marginalised individuals and communities.

Among the highly affected are the adolescents and young people. In response to the theme for this year’s HTCT Day commemoration “Young People Make A Difference! Test for HIV” is a strong testimony of the commitment the Republican President Mr. Hakainde Hichilema, through the Government, towards the well-being and development of Zambia’s youth.

Despite the progress Zambia made in achieving 90-90-90 UNAIDS Targets by 2020, the country is still facing 50, 000 New Infections per year and this means Zambia is not on track to end the AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by 2030 if strategies to accelerate prevention of new infections are not implemented.

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