

WHO declares failure to deliver AIDS medicines a global health emergency

At a special session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 22 September, WHO declared the failure to expand access to antiretrovirals in the developing world a global health emergency. The announcement was made together with UNAIDS and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis & Malaria.

Only 5% of the six million people requiring antiretrovirals in the developing world are receiving them. In sub-Saharan Africa, which bears most of the global HIV/AIDS burden, only 50 000 people of the 4.1 million who need treatment actually have access to it. This despite the availability of treatment for a dollar a day or less.

The global target is to provide antiretroviral medicines to three million people by the end of 2005. However, using existing programmes, fewer than one million people who need treatment will receive it by the close of 2005. Achieving the target, otherwise known as "3 by 5," needs an immediate emergency response but also a change in long-term thinking. "To deliver antiretroviral treatment to the millions who need it, we must change the way we think and change the way we act," said Dr LEE Jong-wook, Director-General of WHO.

WHO, together with UNAIDS and other partners, is leading the response to the global health emergency. It is urging governments, donors, other international and nongovernmental organizations, people living with HIV/AIDS, and industry to work together in closing the gap between patient and treatment. Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director, highlighted the importance of gaining strong commitment from the governments of those countries most affected. "AIDS therapy is a long-term commitment, not a one shot," said Dr Piot. "We therefore need dramatic and sustained increases in resources and political commitment — including from hard-hit countries themselves."

In order to achieve the "3 by 5" target, WHO will provide Emergency Response Teams to those countries with the highest burden of HIV/AIDS based

on direct appeals from governments. These teams, made up of AIDS treatment experts will make rapid assessments of the national barriers to the global target and will work with governments to find ways to speed up drug delivery.

An AIDS Drugs and Diagnostics Facility is also planned to assist countries with drug procurement issues such as price and quality. Procurement has been one of the major barriers to accessing AIDS drugs. Its inspiration, the Global TB Drug Facility (GDF) solved this problem in many of the countries suffering from a high burden of tuberculosis.

Other strands to WHO's response include the planned publication of treatment guidelines for the administration of antiretrovirals, the establishment of a system to track the progress of treatment programmes and the emergency expansion of training for health care professionals in the delivery of standardized antiretroviral treatment.

If the battle to get AIDS drugs to those who need it is to get back on track, "business as usual will not work," said Dr LEE. "Business as usual means watching thousands of people die every single day." On World AIDS Day on 1 December, WHO will announce the details of a comprehensive global strategy to meet the "3 by 5" target. ■