

## MINISTRY OF HEALTH

### 100,000 PATIENTS TO ACCESS ANTI-RETROVIRAL DRUGS

*By Moses Bwalatum, Newvision Dec 1 2003*

The Government of Uganda is committed to increasing access to anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs at a significantly reduced cost. Currently there is yet no government subsidy to patients on antiretroviral therapy. Those already on therapy have difficulty in covering the cost of their treatment and laboratory test.

“Our ultimate goal is to provide universal access to anti-retroviral drugs, the national target is to reach 100,000 patients by 2007” said Dr Namagala Elizabeth, the Coordinator Antiretroviral Therapy program, in the STD/AIDS Control Program, Ministry of Health.

Dr. Namagala said that there are about 17,000 accessing anti-retroviral therapy of which over 80% are paying for their treatment. This represents only 10% of AIDS patients that require antiretroviral drugs. She said that there are currently 120,000 patients with full-blown AIDS in Uganda and that without antiretroviral therapy many will die in the next decade.

Today 33 facilities have been accredited to provide anti-retroviral therapy, but only 27 centres are functional. These are Mulago National Referral Hospital, seven government regional referral hospitals in Arua, Gulu, Fort Portal, Kabale, Masaka, Mbale and Mbarara and five private hospital of Lacor, Nsambya, Mengo, Rubaga and Kololo. Soroti hospital has recently started providing treatment. She said that expansion of antiretroviral services to all district hospitals including missionary hospitals is planned for end of 2004.

The Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC) and the Mildmay centre are the only two centres of excellence that provide anti-retroviral therapy services. The JCRC handles about 8,000 patients and Mildmay 1,000 patients. Eight private medical centres including African Air Rescue (AAR), Case Clinic, Kadic Centre, International Medical Centre, the Surgery, Victoria Medical Centre, Bank of Uganda and Nile Breweries Staff Clinics provide anti-retroviral services.

Presently three non-governmental organisations, the AIDS Health Foundation in Masaka, MSF France in Arua Hospital, and GTZ in fort Portal hospital are providing free antiretroviral drugs.

“Antiretroviral drugs procured by the World Bank are expected in the country by February next year” Dr. Namagala said. She explained that the drugs will initially treat 3,000 adults and 300 children.

Vulnerable children including orphans and those who are unable to pay will receive antiretroviral drugs. A subsidy of 90% cost of the drugs will be applied centrally. Patients will pay less than 10% of cost and not more than Shs. 10,000 per month.

The distribution of antiretroviral drugs will be based on the record of underlying principles of the antiretroviral policy. The policy also requires that expansion of access to antiretroviral drugs be implemented in a phased manner using a public-private mix strategy and that anti-retroviral drugs be universally accessible to those who need them. Dr. Cissy Kityo, Deputy Director Research and Clinical Services at the Joint Clinical Research Centre said that currently patients accessing treatment at the centre clinics within the government hospital have to pay for the drugs.

“There are eighteen different drugs on the market, their costs range from \$28 – 60 for generics and \$86 – 560 for brand depending on combination” she said. Effective drugs are in the market. Evidence is available to show that most patients who get started and maintained on anti-retroviral therapy get improvement of their quality of life, she explained. “Antiretroviral drugs are not a cure but simply stop the multiplication of the virus” she said. “Antiretroviral drugs increase life expectancy by delaying disease progression. They improve the quality of life of the patient by reducing the incidence of opportunistic infections and other AIDS related illnesses”, she said.

HIV/AIDS has claimed more than a million lives since it was first discovered in 1982. Dr. Managala said that provision of antiretroviral drugs will bring back to life communities ravaged by the disease. Parents will be kept alive so that they can cater for their families. Workers will stay productive and the country’s economy will be improved. In addition effects of treatment will reduce stigma and discrimination, thus enabling societies to emerge from the shadow of fear and address HIV/AIDS more openly.