

Govt rolls out new AIDS drug

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People living with HIV/AIDS have a reason to smile, following the introduction of a new wonder drug by the Government.

The latest antiretroviral (ARV) drug dubbed Dolutergravir (DTG) was introduced last month by the Ministry of Health with support from the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) and Unitaid, an anti-HIV, tuberculosis and malaria organisation.

"DTG is a stronger drug. It achieves suppression of HIV much faster than other drugs such as Efavirenz and Nevirapine and has fewer adverse effects," Dr Joshua Musinguzi, the ministry's HIV/AIDS control programme manager, explained.

According to Musinguzi, the drug is currently being given to people who suffer severe side effects of using Efavirenz and Nevirapine at six centres in Kampala and Wakiso.

DTG was developed by Viiiv Healthcare, a global HIV drugs company headquartered in London. It is now produced as a generic drug by Aurobindo Pharmaceuticals in India and Mylan Pharmaceuticals in the US.

Other African countries that have adopted DTG include South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria.

Speaking to people living with HIV from different districts who had gathered at Fairway Hotel in Kampala on Wednesday, Dr Stephen Watiti, a member of the African Community Advocacy Board (AFROCAB) of HIV researchers, said DTG is a game changer because of its benefits.

Watiti said according to the three studies under which DTG was tested, it proved superior basing on the different results.

"It delivered rapid and sustained

HIV 'WONDER DRUG' UNVEILED IN UGANDA

Uganda is the third African country, after Kenya and Nigeria, to launch new antiretroviral drug Dolutergravir (DTG)

THE BENEFITS

- Small tablet size
- Can be taken with or without food
- No time-of-day restrictions
- No boosting required
- Few clinically significant drug-drug interactions



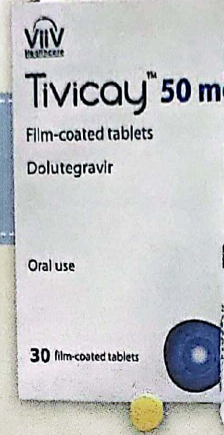
6,500

People to receive the drug in pilot study



24

Days DTG takes to reduce viral loads. (Current ARVs take 84 days)



HIV IN UGANDA

1.3 million
UGANDANS LIVING WITH HIV

874,124

UGANDANS ON ANTIRETROVIRAL TREATMENT (as at June 2016)



Watiti is optimistic about DTG

efficacy and demonstrated a faster time to viral suppression compared to Atripla."

The time for reducing viral load (the amount of virus in one's blood stream) for DTG was 24 days compared to the 84 days with Atripla, he explained. DTG was also found to have a high barrier to resistance, meaning it is more durable as people taking it will take some time without developing resistance.

"We got support from CHAI in Uganda and a pilot study is being done on 6,500 doses for a few people to see how they react so that we have evidence from people who have been complaining of severe side effects of drugs such as Efavirenz," Watiti explained.

According to Prossy Namakula, a member of AFROCAB, DTG was well-tolerated with a few discontinuations, and it did not have most of the adverse

effects experienced in other drugs like Atripla.

The adverse effects of some of the ARVs are responsible for discontinuation of medication, she said. Common ARV side effects include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache and skin rash. Some drugs also cause severe liver and kidney problems.

A person living with HIV from Lira, who was part of the meeting, told Watiti that she feels heat inside her body and has a rash on her arms. When she told her doctor in Lira, she was told that because her viral load was low, there was no need to substitute her medication — moreover DTG has not reached Lira. She was advised to continue with her medication. But she says she is

uncomfortable.

Namakula said DTG was considered convenient and, therefore, easy to take. "It is one small tablet (500mg) taken once a day. It can be taken with or without food and with little time of day restrictions. It was also found to have very few drug interactions," she explained.

The drug was included in the WHO guidelines which Uganda adopted. It was also included on the revised treatment guidelines of December 2016 as an alternate first line drug, according to Musinguzi.

A new report released last month indicated that Uganda had reduced HIV prevalence from 7.3% in 2011 to 6%. A total of 1.3 million Ugandans are living with HIV. Of these, about one million are on treatment.

"The cost is not an issue; DTG is surprisingly cheaper than the drugs we have currently," Musinguzi said.

The Government this year introduced a new policy whereby whoever tests HIV positive is given free ARVs in a move to reduce new infections. However, those not interested in free treatment can buy ARVs at around sh50,000 per dose on the local market. DTG is still being piloted.

Musinguzi was optimistic that using resources from the Government, Global Fund and other development partners, the Ministry of Health would roll out the drug in 2018 as a fixed dose combination that is easier to swallow. "It will be an alternative for those who cannot tolerate other drugs," Musinguzi said.

SIMPLY READ

To find out more about the DTG drug, visit <https://aidsinfo.nih.gov/drugs/509/dolutegravir/0/patient>