

HIV/AIDS: Pray but take your ARVs, too

By Lillian N. Magezi

One of the challenges Rev. Gideon Byamugisha has encountered during his 25 years of living with HIV/AIDS is Christians advising him to stop taking medical treatment and put his trust in God to heal him. Byamugisha, a clergy in the Anglican Church in Uganda, notes that such advice can put a believer at crossroads.

Another person with a story similar to Byamugisha's is Rev. Rahab Wanjiru, a clergyman in Kenya, who tested HIV-positive in 1997. Both Wanjiru and Byamugisha have continued to adhere to their anti-retroviral drugs while serving God.

The two gave their testimonies at a recent regional consultation meeting of the World Council of Churches and UNAIDS. The meeting that took place at the Royal Suites in Bugolobi, Kampala, focused on HIV treatment, the importance of adherence to treatment and faith healing in Africa.

Faith healing a challenge to adherence to ART

According to Dr. Norah Namuwenge, an official from the Ministry of Health, while considerable progress has been made in scaling up anti-retroviral therapy (ART) among people living with HIV/AIDS, a number of challenges regarding adherence to treatment have been noted. One of them is the phenomenon of faith healing.

Prof. Ezra Chitando from Zimbabwe noted that some people living with HIV/AIDS refuse to seek treatment or default on their therapy because they have been told by their religious or traditional spiritual leaders that they will get healed by their faith.

Pregnant women with HIV/AIDS have also been discouraged from seeking services for prevention of mother-to-child transmission. Religious leaders have also made people to deny their HIV status and stopped them from disclosing it to others, Chitando noted. Church and communities can be hostile to people who disclose their status because people look at HIV/AIDS as a disease that people invite to themselves.

Namuwenge added that the concept of faith healing and its implications has posed a challenge to not only the treatment of HIV/AIDS, but also to other chronic diseases, such as cancer, tuberculosis, hypertension and diabetes.

Chitando explained that at the heart of the issue of faith healing lies an upsurge in religious sects and, subsequently, competition and rivalry among the different sects as they compete for



Faith healing and medicine should be treated as complementary to encourage people living with HIV to adhere to anti-retroviral treatment

CAUTION!

Do not interpret undetectable viral load as a cure. Cure means there is no presence of HIV in one's body, while undetectable means the virus cannot be detected in the blood, but it is still in other parts of the body, such as the bone marrow and brain. If someone with an undetectable viral load stopped taking medicine, they would become sick again.

followers. This has put preachers under pressure to advertise their ministries so that they can thrive and grow. This has led to the emergence of "religious entrepreneurs", who invest heavily in miracles, which are looked at as a resource to demonstrate power.

Such "religious entrepreneurs" are preaching deliverance from all illnesses, misfortune and disease, including HIV, which has no known medical cure.

Caution

However, members of the public were reminded that HIV still has no cure. There is treatment to prolong life and increase the quality of life, which a person is required to adhere to for life,

even when they do not feel sick.

Myths

Byamugisha noted that many spiritual healers tell people living with HIV/AIDS that it is a curse or a punishment from God for sexual sins. Therefore, patients are told that the solution is faith healing because although ARVs take away physical pain and symptoms, they cannot take away the curse. They tell people that they can be healed instantly in the name of Jesus, if they repent their sins.

Others are told that HIV/AIDS is caused by

witchcraft. However, this is not true and people living with HIV/AIDS are encouraged to take medication.

People living with HIV/AIDS flopped

Byamugisha urged people living with HIV/AIDS to make use of gains in science and not be deceived by messages on only faith healing. He noted that there is need for people to do away with the dichotomy between science and spirituality, explaining that medical knowledge is wisdom from God and the use of medicine is an act of faith and showing gratitude to God for the gift of medicine.

Chitando added that some miracles have been made possible by medicine, for example, an HIV-positive mother to give birth to a child who has no HIV is a miracle enabled by developments in medicine.

People living with HIV/AIDS were also advised to:

- Endeavour to get proper information from the right people so as to improve their quality of life
- Not to take herbs
- Join support groups

Disclosure

Disclosure of one's HIV status was looked at as a move that helps people to access medical care and adhere to treatment without shame.

Wanjiru noted that disclosure is important to help communities fight stigma. It was noted that it is unfortunate that there are some people who have not disclosed their status, even to their sexual partners.

However, Nyambura advised that one might not disclose publicly if they do not want to, but they must disclose to their sexual partners.

She added that it is also advisable for one to disclose to their family members so as to get support.

WHY ADHERE TO YOUR ARVS

Believers of any religion have been discouraged from exclusive reliance on faith healing and failing to adhere to treatment for any condition.

Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, the project co-ordinator of the World Council of Churches, urged people living with HIV/AIDS to embrace both the gift of faith and that of medicine, explaining that faith should work hand in hand with medicine.

Dr. Norah Namuwenge, an official from the health ministry noted that although having faith is important for people living with HIV/AIDS because it plays a critical role in health and healing, adherence to ARVs is critical in both maximising efficacy of the drugs and preventing drug resistance.

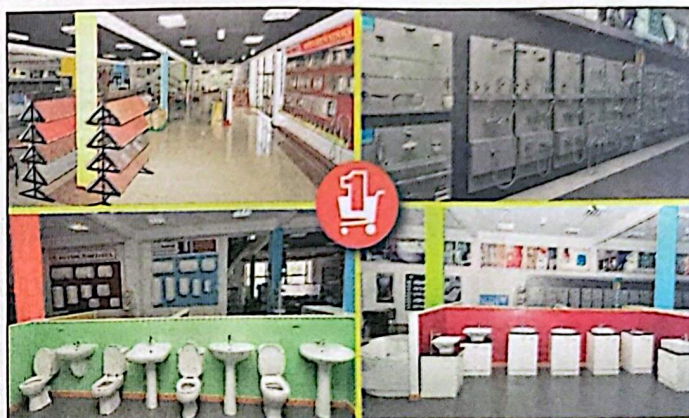
She noted that failure to adhere to treatment has had devastating consequences for the fight against HIV/AIDS as it has caused patients complications, like opportunistic infections, such as tuberculosis and even death. In addition, it has led to drug resistance, which necessitates patients



Anti-retroviral drugs

to be put on stronger drugs, which are expensive and thus increased costs of treatment.

She explained that adherence to treatment will maximally suppress one's viral load, help them fight opportunistic infections and, thus, greatly improve one's quality of life and saving lives. Namuwenge noted that if one's viral load is maximally suppressed and it becomes undetectable, there will be a reduced risk of HIV transmission.



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