

Call for greater private sector response to HIV and AIDS

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A unique collaborative 'road show,' featuring several cutting edge South African HIV/AIDS business planners began a country-wide tour in Cape Town today in a clarion call for an accelerated, more unified response from the private sector to the epidemic.

The 'Work the Future' road show, sponsored by Metropolitan in partnership with Business Unity South Africa (BUSA) and the South African Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS (SABCOHA), is a pragmatic platform that will outline scenarios ranging from devastating to inspiring, based on a range of possible responses by civil society, business and government.

Its chief aim is to engage business leaders on their role in the HIV&AIDS and STI Strategic Plan for South Africa, 2007 - 2011 (NSP), promote 'critical' business collaboration and highlight what business is currently doing (or failing to do) in addressing prevention of HIV infections and in providing treatment, care and support.

In his keynote address, Professor Wiseman Nkuhlu, President of the International Organisation of Employers and former Chief Executive of the Secretariat of new Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), made an urgent call to action.

He said South Africa was unlikely to reach the international community's target of providing universal access to HIV/Aids treatment, care and support by 2010, reaffirmed at the Mexico International Aids Conference in August this year.

"Looking at our situation, we are far behind, so we make this call to business in particular to redouble efforts to broaden and deepen private/public partnerships that would scale up our impact, both in terms of treatment and prevention; urgent action is essential," he stressed.

Nathea Nicolay, Metropolitan Employee Benefit's Manager of Aids Risk Consulting, said that in spite of a comprehensive national plan to address HIV, South Africa's private sector response to the epidemic was not enough.

New infections are running at an estimated 500 000 per annum.

'If business does not successfully address prevention, we might see a 'Winter of Discontent' scenario with 8,7 million new infections and 8,1 million Aids deaths over the twenty years from 2005 to 2025,' the actuary warned.

Such a scenario illustrated the devastating effect that a failure to respond successfully to the epidemic would have, especially given the potential for low economic growth created by the current international credit crisis.

South Africa's current relatively high levels of access to ART might not be sustainable with low economic growth and increasing healthcare demands. Even under the 'Summer for All,' and 'Autumn of Limited Opportunity' scenarios it was questionable whether the health system would be able to handle the over a million people she estimated would be on ART by 2025.

Vic van Vuuren, COO of BUSA, described 'Work the Future,' as a call for business, government and labour to move beyond conversation to 'practical implementation', working together to achieve the 'Summer for All' scenario.

He said companies who were successfully managing HIV and AIDS programmes in the workplace needed to 'think creatively,' about how they could share their knowledge and resources. One example would be using their supply chain networks to open up opportunities and access funding for SMME's, while another would be collaborating with NGO's that receive international funding.

A prime example of collaboration is Metropolitan's support of community initiatives such as the 'Tutu Tester,' a mobile clinic for quick testing for hypertension, diabetes and HIV, run by the Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation; an after-hours HIV/AIDS clinic in Stellenbosch; Red Ribbon, AIDS Analysis Africa Online and AIDSBuzz HIV/Aids internet information portals and 'Humana, People to People' in Gauteng that offers testing, counselling and educational programmes in Soweto.

Brad Mears, CEO of SABCOHA, said South Africa's destiny was 'in our own hands'.

To achieve 'the destiny we desire,' universal commitment to four "zero tolerance" goals was needed. These were: achieving a society where new infections were not tolerated, no mother to child infections, no-one dying or getting sick from Aids and no tolerance for stigma or discrimination.

Nicolay said that two years ago when Metropolitan first launched the 'Live the Future' scenarios, many experts believed South Africa was headed for the 'Autumn of Limited Opportunity' scenario (high economic growth and low social collaboration). However it is becoming 'increasingly clear that we might be heading towards the 'Winter of Discontent' scenario with an economic recession looming and a fragmented society (low social collaboration).

Business in South Africa needs to lead by example and work together to beat HIV/Aids. A 'Summer for All' scenario is only possible 'if we focus all our energies on a massive prevention campaign that involves hugely stepping up the ability business has to influence behaviour change'.

She estimated a less than 50% uptake on HIV disease management programmes in business - echoing the half million people who had so far accessed treatment out of the million estimated to be in need of it in the public sector.

Business needs to focus on the goals of the NSP, (which closely match the 'Summer for All' scenario), reduce new infections by half by 2011 and expand access to treatment, care and support to 80% of those in need.

Mark Heywood, deputy chairperson of the South African National Aids Council and executive director of the Aids Law Project, outlined the NSP to delegates, detailed why it was so crucially important and explained how it relates to business.

Diane Ritson, Founder and CEO of Siriti Africa and the business representative on the Western Cape Provincial AIDS Council revealed the HIV and AIDS Provincial Strategic Plan for the Western Cape. In the Western Cape Province, 75% of the estimated 55 000 people in need of ART were receiving it, however prevention efforts are still lacking in the face of a growing epidemic.

The Plan focuses on the following principles:

1. The revision and implementation of the behaviour change approach
2. Strengthening of Civil Society implementation
3. Consolidation and building of partnerships
4. Increasing contribution to SMME's
5. Aligning activities between stakeholders

This was well in line with the Summer scenario characterised by commonplace compulsory counselling and voluntary testing in the workplace, heavy business investment in behaviour change and at least 25% of people testing their status every year. This optimal scenario also features strong collaborative leadership, high social collaboration and high economic growth with the focus firmly on preventing new infections. In this scenario business drives prevention efforts through compulsory counselling and voluntary testing initiatives.

The Western Cape has been regarded as the gold standard in terms of treatment initiatives. The challenge is for the province to develop a gold standard prevention initiative. Prevention strategy in the Western Cape will focus on:
The use of communication specialists to develop new, fresh and powerful messages
Education and testing for employees and families

Reaching SMME's through large companies' supply-chain strategies
Providing employees with both male and female condoms through a partnership

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