



Desperate people rely on HIV to get money

By Ida Jooste

First there were Mbeki's babies - children said to have been conceived out of desperation: their young mothers depending on the government's monthly child support grant for survival.

Now, an even grimmer picture has emerged: increasingly, Aids counsellors and medical practitioners are coming across HIV-positive people who wish for their CD4 count to drop to 200 or below in the hope that doctors will recommend they get a government disability grant.

"That's more or less the level where the virus is beginning to win the battle, all sorts of infections seize the opportunity - the person soon becomes debilitated," says Professor Alan Smith, the head of virology at the Nelson Mandela Medical School in Durban.

For years, an HIV-positive person looks and feels just fine

A CD4 count of 200 also represents the point at which anti-retroviral therapy is recommended.

Smith explains that a healthy person's CD4 count can be anything between 600 and 1 200. Shortly after HIV infection, one typically experiences 'flu-like symptoms, a sign that the body is fighting off the virus. But this battle wages on, reaching the so-called viral set point, which is a state of balance between the immune system and the virus.

For years, an HIV-positive person looks and feels just fine. Slowly, imperceptibly, the CD4 count will drop as the viral load increases. It will take nine years on average before an HIV-infected person gets to the stage where his or her immune system cannot ward off infection. For many people, this is the time they first discover their HIV status.

But the quest for a low CD4 count is shocking, even to those used to the daily trauma of treating the disease. Siya Maphumulo, a Durban Aids counsellor, heard a woman from his HIV support group complaining: "Oh no. I've just come back from the doctor - it's not dropping, my CD4 count is staying high, where am I going to get money now?"

The woman, who hasn't been able to find work for years, told The Sunday Independent that at least the disability grant of R700 a month would pay for proper food.

Maphumulo believes education is vital

To combat the deadly CD4 count quest, Maphumulo said that his weekly support group sessions at Durban's Christian Hope Centre have had to introduce discussions about the finer points about how the virus works.

"Knowledge of CD4 count and viral load readings will become necessary as people look forward to the [anti-retroviral] treatment that the government has been promising," he said.

To Dr Janet Giddy, the HIV and Aids programme co-ordinator at Durban's McCord Hospital, the concept of people relying on illness for money is nothing new. "People used to try to get a 'TB grant', because, truthfully, such an illness can

render you unable to work. The worry is when money is an incentive to get ill."

It is what the department of social development calls a "perverse incentive".

Reggie Jokweni, a counsellor at Lifeline's drop-in centre in Durban who dealt with such cases this week, said: "What I tell them is, look, it will take some time to process and approve the grant anyway, then you get the grant, maybe for one month, then it comes just in time to pay for your funeral."

Sister Maud Mbambo of McCord Hospital said it all came down to education. "I had a client who was cross with us when her CD results came back and it was still fine. She blamed us for holding her back from the grant. I told her there's more to life than bringing yourself down and waiting to die - for money."

Maphumulo said a positive attitude would add years and certainly quality to the lives of HIV-positive people. "The problem is [that] most people don't know about [the anti-retroviral] programmes. The government has not given a date for the treatment. And the few who know about CD4 tests just can't afford them, as most labs who do them charge hundreds of rands. Or they may spend their last money on the test. Some think there's a general HIV grant - they haven't even heard of CD4 tests."

Maphumulo believes education is vital. "There will be more deaths. People were poor and uninformed to start with, now Aids is causing more poverty. But we can do something about education."

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