HIV is a forgotten pandemic during Covid-19 era

THE Covid-19 pandemic is a global health emergency that has taken central position in service provision—pushing HIV to the periphery. This is an issue of concern in South Africa, a country that had made substantial progress in the prevention, treatment and care of HIV.

As greater efforts were directed towards finding strategies of maintaining and mitigating Covid-19 and its impacts, HIV services were generally overlooked. A recent study by Dr Jienchi Dorward and colleagues from the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa found that the provision of antiretroviral therapy remained constant, while HIV testing and antiretroviral therapy (ART) initiations were adversely affected. Interruptions in HIV counselling and testing have had adverse impacts on the health of the infected persons as this delays their initiation on ART, weakening their immune system.

The hard lockdown measures were meant to ensure that the coronavirus is contained, so as to reduce and prevent the spread, but this has had adverse effects on HIV service provision.

South Africa has wide coverage of HIV testing and counselling services which are provided at its mobile clinics and facilities. Due to the restrictions, these services were also discontinued. The questions that emerge are around how people would know their status. Additionally, if they cannot test, they would not know if they have to be initiated on ART. Of concern too is the fact that most people who rely on these services to access condoms were not left unaffected by these measures.

The number of people infected by Covid-19 and those living with HIV in South Africa is alarming. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases states that there are 2,429,435 confirmed Covid-19 cases and about 83,000 Covid-19-related deaths.

In terms of HIV, the report from Statistics South Africa states that approximately 8.2 million people were living with HIV in 2020, approximately 13.7% of the population.

We know that despite being one of the countries with the highest number of people living with HIV in the world, South Africa has the largest roll-out of ART in the world. The country has documented extraordinary progress in ART roll-out in which by 2020, 71% of HIV-positive adults and 47% of children were on ART. In addition, a recent report from the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) states that South Africa became the first country in the sub-Saharan African region to approve the pre-exposure prophylaxis given to people at high risk of HIV infection. Other countries have documented the success of their ART roll-out.

In comparison, Latin America has an HIV prevalence lower (2.1 million) than South Africa. However, its ART roll-out is analogous to South Africa with 61% of adults and 46% of children living with HIV on ART.

To maintain the Rupahli in HIV prevention and treatment, the government would ensure an uninterrupted supply of ART so as to prevent HIV-related deaths and prevent an increase in HIV incidence resulting from lack of prevention.

The link between HIV and Covid-19 is concerning. A report from UNAIDS states that people living with HIV experience more severe outcomes and have higher comorbidities from Covid-19 than those not infected. The World Health Organization noted:

• People living with HIV were 31% more likely to be admitted to hospital with severe or critical Covid-19 after controlling for age, gender and comorbidities.
• They were more likely to die after admission to hospital with Covid-19; people living with HIV had a 30% increased risk of death independent of age, gender, severity at presentation, and comorbidities.

Among people living with HIV, diabetes, high blood pressure, being male or over 75 years old were each associated with increased risk of death. Under such circumstances, it is expected that people living with HIV be considered as a priority in any of the Covid-19 mitigation strategies. However, it is shocking to learn that by mid-2021, globally, most people living with HIV had not received the vaccine. In South Africa, where above 13% of the population is living with HIV, prioritising vaccination of this key population is crucial. Nonetheless, this subject has not reached the national conversation in any significant way and there have not been any campaigns to encourage people living with HIV to get vaccinated.

HIV and Covid-19 are twin pandemics and cannot be treated in isolation due to the adverse effects Covid-19 can have on people living with HIV.

Chibango writes in her personal capacity.