ECHO has put contraception back on the agenda. It has reinforced the fact that women are exposed to high levels of sexually transmitted infections

HELEN REES
Professor and Executive Director of Wits RHI

DISEASE

Renewed hope in fighting HIV

A DOCTOR draws blood from a man to check for HIV/AIDS at a mobile testing unit in Ndeeba, a suburb in Uganda's capital, Kampala. [REUTERS]

MSF community-based project in KZN achieved UNAIDS targets

LERATO DIALE
lerato.diale@iol.co.za

The results of a survey by the international medical humanitarian organisation, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), show that it is possible to reach the UNAIDS targets of 90-90-90 – described as among the best news to come out of this year’s South African AIDS Conference.

In a South African first, the MSF’s community-based HIV/TB project in Embu, KZN achieved the UNAIDS targets of 90-90-90. The area has one of the highest HIV rates in the country, with one in four people living with HIV.

The results of a 2018 study of over 3000 people indicate that 90% of people living with HIV in the area know their status, 94% are on antiretroviral treatment and 95% had a suppressed viral load.

HEALTH

OLIVER METH

THE eThekwini Declaration was adopted at the ninth South African AIDS Conference that concluded in Durban on Friday.

A number of commitments were agreed to by the government, scientists and civil society.

Among the resolutions adopted were the development of programmes to encourage the active participation of youth in the HIV response, investment in research, addressing inequalities, particularly those based on gender, and empowering young women and girls.

According to Doctors Without Borders, the incidence of HIV has decreased among women aged 15 to 29 from 2.9% to 1.2%, but the figure remained high and pointed to the continued need faced by adolescent girls and young women.

The declaration set out to put young people at the centre of the fight against the HIV epidemic.

Deputy President David Mabuza, who also serves as South African National AIDS Council (Sanac) chairman, accepted the declaration handed over to him at the closing plenary.

"There is again a need to revive the sense of urgency, political will, compassion, transparency and accountability towards reinvigoration of the HIV response," read the declaration.

Conference chairperson Professor Rehliwe Phaswana-Matyu said the Fourth Industrial Revolution and innovative interventions needed to be embraced as a means of stopping the spread of HIV.

Phaswana-Matyu said: "Instead of having young people at a physical location, you can virtually connect with them. This is one of the pivotal innovations that could help, given the magnitude of the epidemic among youth, which is rising."

"We want to strengthen political will. We want to remove any sense of complacency that might be there. We want to strengthen our health information system and put young people at the centre of the epidemic and reduce the number of new infections."

While the incidence of HIV in SA was declining, new infections among the youth, particularly adolescent girls and young women, remained high.

It was confirmed at the conference that about 7.9 million people in South Africa were living with HIV and more than 4.4 million were on treatment.

Cape Town’s Professor Salim Abdool Karim added that the fight against the epidemic was far from over because more than 5 000 new infections were contracted around the world daily.

During the closing plenary session, Mabuza reiterated the government’s commitment to the fight against HIV.

He said: “As government we are ready and willing to hold hands with you, walk every mile with you until our total victory over HIV.”

He said 2 million more people needed to be initiated on ARVs and that the country was not doing enough to prevent new infections.

“What’s clear is that we are not doing well on preventing new HIV infections. The gap is too big and we must close it.”

He added that stigma and discrimination were preventing South Africans from reaching their targets.

A number of commitments were made to support unprecedented innovations, technologies and strategies to control the epidemic as the country moved into the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

It was also confirmed that: • progress towards the 2030 global epidemic control targets was not adequate, • key population and vulnerable groups remained under-diagnosed and under-treated, with higher mortality and morbidity rates, • the health system was overburdened, resulting in service delivery challenges.

The four-day conference was attended by more than 3 000 delegates from across the world.