Medical Xpress

Experts: Africa countries lose out on AIDS funding

July 19 2012, by ANGUS SHAW

(AP) — African nations are not receiving adequate international funding to fight HIV/AIDS, leaving them to face catastrophic consequences without enough medication, an independent, global medical and humanitarian organization said Thursday.

Experts at Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Doctors Without Borders, said Congo is only able to supply anti-retroviral drugs to 15 percent of the people needing them and "patients are literally dying on our doorstep."

In a statement released in Johannesburg ahead of the United Nations world AIDS conference in Washington starting July 22, the organization said African countries worst affected by the pandemic were the least able to provide "the best science" available to fight it.

The group said that while world data by the U.N. has pointed to gains over the disease, donors have scaled back on earlier funding commitments to Africa.

African countries were being increasingly urged to find their own domestic solutions to the AIDS pandemic, it said.

"This is just a cynical excuse for donors to scale back on their earlier commitments of putting an end to this disease. It will have catastrophic consequences for patients," Dr. Eric Goemaere, the organization's senior regional adviser for southern Africa, told reporters in Johannesburg. "It would be outrageous to assume that African states could combat this

emergency alone, given their current limited resources."

At the Washington summit, leaders and scientists are scheduled to review programs aimed at eventually eradicating AIDS. But plans to increase treatment and improve the quality of care in developing countries now risks being scrapped entirely as international support stagnated, the organization said.

The Global Fund, a major backer of anti-AIDS projects in South Africa and the region, now faced waning donor interest, it said.

The latest study issued by UNAIDS reports that international anti-AIDS funding hovered at about $8 billion in 2008 and has not increased by any significant amounts since then, forcing some developing nations to increase their own spending to keep existing programs running.

But just as the funds are being squeezed, bounds are being made.

South Africa on Thursday reported a decline in cases of mother-to-child transmission of the virus that causes AIDS because of treatment given to mothers and babies aged four to six weeks.

"It has proven that putting mothers and infants on treatment early on really works," Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi told reporters.

In South Africa, 32 percent of live births are HIV-exposed and it is estimated 30 percent of HIV-exposed babies will be infected within eight weeks of birth if there is no drug treatment. The country has 5.6 million people living with AIDS, the highest of any world nation, and an infection rate of about 18 percent of the population of 50 million.

According to Doctors Without Borders, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe have also reported progress in their AIDS programs.

Malawi was the first to begin prevention of mother-to-child transmission through treating infected expectant and breast feeding mothers.

Stuart Chuka, an official of the Malawi health ministry, said the eradication of AIDS now relied on state-of-the-art medical technology and the money to pay for it.

"Just as success is within reach, we're up against a great financial squeeze. I truly believe we can end AIDS. But we can't do it alone," he said Thursday.

Thierry Dethier, a Doctors Without Borders official based in Congo, said in that country just one tenth of health facilities offer AIDS treatment.

"We receive critically ill patients who have desperately searched for ARV treatment" whose condition had reached the point of death, he said.

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Citation: Experts: Africa countries lose out on AIDS funding (2012, July 19) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-experts-africa-countries-aids-funding.html

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