

'Live positively': Togo's 'Tino' sets example for HIV/AIDS

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Augustin Dokla is arguably Togo's most famous person with HIV, having lived with the virus—against the odds—since 1999. Sixteen years later, he's still fighting for the rights of those infected.

"I will not succumb to this infection but rather I will die with it. I am resolved to bear the heavy burden," he told AFP.

Among friends at Espoir-Vie, the West African nation's largest non-governmental association for people living with HIV, Dokla exudes optimism.

He's still unsure how he contracted the the [virus](#). But, he says, none of that matters in a region where people with HIV are often shunned and access to the right drugs is limited, through supply and cost.

"The important thing now is to live positively with this infection," said the 44-year-old.

Shock diagnosis

Dokla tested positive for HIV in 1999 after a bout of serious pneumonia, which saw him spend three months in hospital.

"I had only flesh and bone left after losing close to half of my normal weight of 75 kilograms (165 pounds, 11 stone 8 pounds)," he said.

"One day, I decided to go for an HIV test. When the nurse told me of my status, I let out a long sigh and we stared at each other for some seconds because at that time AIDS was synonymous to a death sentence, with drugs being scarce and very expensive.

"My mother cried her heart out when I broke the bad news to her. But it was a big relief for me that I knew what was going to make life difficult for me."

For two months in 2000, Dokla was treated in a Paris hospital. He was discharged—and determined to survive.

"It was this treatment that saved me. I refused to die to enable me commit myself the fight against this damned virus," he added.

Since then, he has become a powerful speaker at seminars and awareness campaigns and also heads an agency supporting people living with HIV/AIDS.

Changing attitudes

Togo once had the third-highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection in West Africa. A transient population and low spending on healthcare was blamed.

In 2014, 2.5 percent or 110,000 of Togo's 7.5 million people had HIV, according to UNAIDS and Togo's national committee on the virus.

AIDS-related deaths have declined in recent years from 10,330 in 2009 to 6,641 last year, in part due to vigorous campaigning from charities such as Dokla's.

At the same time, the number of people living with HIV/AIDS taking

anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs seen as key to suppressing the virus and preventing new infections has gone from 16,225 to 37,511 in the same period.

Dokla, or "Tino" to his friends, however, knows that overcoming social attitudes is also part of the battle.

"I do not undergo special treatment apart from my tablets, which I take every day before I go to bed," he explained.

"I travelled a lot for big conferences in the United States, France, Mexico, Belgium, Italy, Spain, etc. In Africa, I have been to some 30 countries and in my native Togo, I have travelled to all the provinces."

'The only battle in my life'

Eight years ago, Dokla mobilised more than 500 people with HIV for a protest march to denounce a lack of ARV drugs and is a regular feature on the public speaking circuit.

"It is the only battle in my life to assist other people not to catch this infection. I give a meaning to my existence each time I give testimony and sensitise ignorant youths on the virus," he said.

"Others living with HIV/AIDS do not have the courage and are hiding for fear of being stigmatised."

"Tino plays a major role in taking care of [people](#) living with AIDS in Togo. He knows our problems and he does not hesitate to defend our interests at major events," said Amoussou, who has been undergoing anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment in the past nine years.

"He is an indefatigable fighter. Each time I see him in public, my hope is

boosted," said Afiavi, a former sex worker who contracted HIV six years ago.

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