

Remarks by the Deputy Minister of Public Works, Mr Ntopile Kganyago MP, at the Wellness/ World AIDS Day held at the Department of Public Works Head Office, Pretoria

Venue: Annex Building, Pretoria

Date: 01 December 2005

The Programme Director

Chief Operations Officer Dr Sean Phillips

Director General, Mr James Maseko

Members of Top Management Committee

Ladies and Gentlemen

Today we observe the day one man got to know something that would change his life and behaviour forever. This was the day that in the early eighties, on which the first case of AIDS was diagnosed. Today, we are here to observe the day on which one and all, each and every one among us, are going to change their lives and behaviour, for ever. It is time for change!

A few years later in 1988, a hundred and forty (140) countries attending the World Summit of Ministers of Health on Programmes for AIDS Prevention in London, unanimously conceived the idea of commemorating this day. Later in the same year the World Health Organization officially declared December 1 World AIDS Day- a day in a year dedicated to raising awareness of the impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

HIV and Aids constitute an epidemic because according to UNAIDS statistics for 2005, 3.1 million people have already died of AIDS in the world and if you think this figure is shocking wait for this one. At least 38 million adults and 2.3 million children are already living with HIV while 4.9 million people became infected with the virus this year.

This is a scary and shocking reality. This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the reason we are standing here today. We are here to recommit to the World AIDS Day theme of “Stop AIDS: Keep the Promise”. We are however also going to do a bit more than publicly commit ourselves. As from today we will make it our life’s mission to do everything in our power to stop HIV and Aids dead in its tracks in our individual and private lives.

The best way for all of us is not to get infected. The best way to win against this virus is to take charge of our lives and practice our ABC: Abstain, Be Faithful, Condomise. Since there is no known cure for AIDS, prevention still remains the most responsive method. I would also today not forget to urge all of you to go for Voluntary Testing and Counselling (VCT) and to know your status.

The Department acknowledges the seriousness of HIV and AIDS and its effect in the workplace. Through its HIV and AIDS Policy, the Department is committed to providing support, guidance and resources to minimise the social and economic effects of the disease on its employees.

This policy is a clear indication of the Department's commitment to assist employees who may be directly or indirectly infected or affected. Our policy provides guidelines on how to manage the impact of HIV and AIDS in the workplace.

We are also very clear that by law no employee should be discriminated against or victimized because of their HIV status. This is one of the ways in which we believe we will get closer to removing the stigma that is attached to HIV. This is also how we will effectively win the war towards the destruction of this enemy in our midst: by closing rank and using all in our arsenal to fight this war.

Let me restate the position of the DPW here today so that tomorrow no one will say they did not know. No person may unfairly discriminate against an employee or an employment applicant on the basis of his/her HIV status. An employee with HIV or AIDS may also not be dismissed simply because he or she is infected.

And thirdly, as employees it is your right to work in a safe workplace to ensure that the risk of occupational exposure to HIV is minimised.

So let us stand together in the fight for life. Let us Stop AIDS and keep that promise.

So what is the best way forward? Chinese war theorist Sun Tsu has this to say in this regard: “The important thing in doing battle is victory, not protracted warfare”. We therefore acknowledge as incomplete the act of speaking about HIV and Aids without placing this in the broader context of wellness. Doing this has the potential to prolong the war and to scupper victory along the ways. HIV and Aids cannot be defeated by the administration of drugs alone but by the development of a total wellness plan that calls for the adoption of a healthier lifestyle.

We seek to adopt a healthier lifestyle because the alternative does not make economic sense. The Employee Wellness Programme does make sense from an economic view. As all doctors will say, Prevention is better than cure. Through the Wellness in Workplace Programme we as DPW acknowledge that it is cost-effective to establish employee health and wellness management programmes in a work environment than to hope to deal with dreaded disease only once it has assumed the level of the epidemic. In this specific regard therefore we have adopted the approach of generic disease management, HIV care and treatment.

I believe that treatment means better access to HIV Testing and counselling. It means the provision of medicines for opportunistic infections caused by HIV, it means encouraging openness and it also means treating HIV/AIDS as a human rights issue. In this regard Employee Wellness management highlights the need and importance of keeping a person with HIV, healthy. This is the context in which we have actively encouraged the establishment of Employee Wellness Programs ..." This is a significant change in paradigm

for us, because we are now saying that HIV infection is not a death sentence.

Our Employee Wellness Program is designed to promote the Physical and Mental Health as well as the well-being of employees. In the context of HIV and Aids, wellness programs include components such as Psychological Support Services, the Provision of Nutritional Supplements, the Provision of Treatment for Post Exposure Prophylaxis, the Provision of Treatment and Vaccines for Opportunistic infection, Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) and the Provision of Antiretroviral Therapy.

We have adopted a holistic approach to life and the treatment of Aids by saying that there is life before and after infection. That I believe should be the focus of our December 1 campaigns, on life and not on death. This change of attitude will go a long way towards dealing with this scourge. A change of attitude to life does not begin when one is infected. It starts before and encompasses a range of changed behaviours such exercising regularly and not smoking and monitoring your heart and circulation on a regular basis.

If there is one thing I would like you to take from today it is the preparedness to adopt a lifestyle change. We must move from the traditional commemoration of World Aids Day by deemphasising the HIV virus as the world's greatest enemy since Hitler. We must instead focus on health, focus on life.

On this World Aids Day we must take greater interest in ourselves, in that way we will take greater care of our bodies in terms of what we eat, drink or smoke. We will care for our heads, will care about the level of fat in our bodies, we will care about the strength of our hearts and we will care about the sugar content in our blood. The men will care to find out whether they have cancers which are particular to men and women will also regularly check whether they are susceptible to these cancers. Once we adopt this attitude, we will, Ladies and Gentlemen, also care to find out what the content of HIV is in our blood. Only in this way will we emerge historic victors in this war.

I thank you.