



ARVs added to HIV/Aids programme

Massmart has extended its HIV/Aids programme to include offering antiretrovirals (ARVs) to every infected permanent employee and his/her spouse.



In line with Massmart's commitment to the wellness of its people, the group launched an HIV/Aids management process in November of 2001. The process incorporated an ongoing programme of prevalence testing, peer counselling and support and widespread education initiatives. Massmart has now taken the next step and has decided to implement a comprehensive HIV/Aids treatment programme that includes the provision of all the necessary medication.

"Irrespective of this, in Massmart we recognise the management of HIV/Aids as a leadership issue and in our case we've taken an important moral decision relating to our people. As a group we employ nearly 15,500 permanent staff, many of whom have spouses and children.

In effect, the decision we've made was taken with the entire Massmart community in mind."

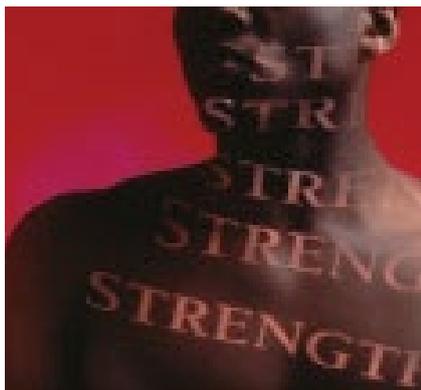
"An HIV/Aids management program is complex," adds Delene Cronje, Human Resources Forum Manager. "The first phase involves voluntary counselling and testing (VCT).

This is followed by the disease management phase, which is registering people who need ARVs on the treatment programme. In both cases you need specialists," she says, "to understand and manage each case individually."

relationship. It goes well beyond the basic employment contract and leads to new issues around joint responsibility for the health of our employees (and therefore our business). There are other formal, contractual implications such as the issue of fringe benefit tax on the provision of ARVs, but essentially this is a critical decision taken in the long-term interests of our employees and our business."

What are ARVs?

ARVs block the action of retroviruses such as HIV. With the latest combination of these drugs, the majority of HIV positive people survive at least another ten years. According to BBC News, research suggests that, "The most effective way to combat HIV is to take a combination of different antiretroviral drugs - usually three at the same time - making it less likely that resistance will be a problem."



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Massmart takes the next step

"Government has struggled to come up with adequate health responses to the HIV/Aids situation," says Steve Glendinning, Massmart Group Human Capital Executive.

Redefining relationships

Glendinning describes the scope of the ARV rollout programme: "This is not a 'project' and does not 'end' as such. In many cases treatment is for life. This really redefines the nature of the employer - employee re-

Contact your human resources officer for more information on ARVs and Massmart's HIV/Aids programme.

Explaining more about ARVs is South African doctor, Dr Clive Evian (MBBCh, M Med [Community Health]). "Treatment is not Mickey Mouse stuff. You have to appreciate that the medical community knows more about this virus than almost any other. The treatment is reasonably free of problems and it works, but it works best if it's given at the right time. You need to start taking it before you get sick, before the immune system is damaged."

The size of the problem

There are approximately 6,5 million South Africans infected with HIV today.

The workforce at Massmart was surveyed a few years ago and it was found that there was a significantly lower infection rate (+/- 10%) amongst the group's employees.

What this means is that the vast majority of employees are not HIV positive. It also means that the 12% to 13% who are infected need antiretroviral (ARV) treatment either now or they will need it soon. Roughly 15% of the infected group probably need it now.

This is why it is vital to get tested. Many people are afraid they might be infected, but don't know for sure. "The first thing to do is know your status," recommends Dr Evian. "It's a win-win scenario. If you're not infected, you can get rid of your fear. Hopefully you will also stop engaging in risky behaviour, like unprotected sex. If you are infected, you can take action immediately and get treatment. The important thing is to stop being fatalistic. You need to empower yourself to change the course of your life. But most important to remember," says Evian, "is that there is hope. There is a definitive treatment. There is a long term future for you even if you are HIV positive."

The true role of nutrition

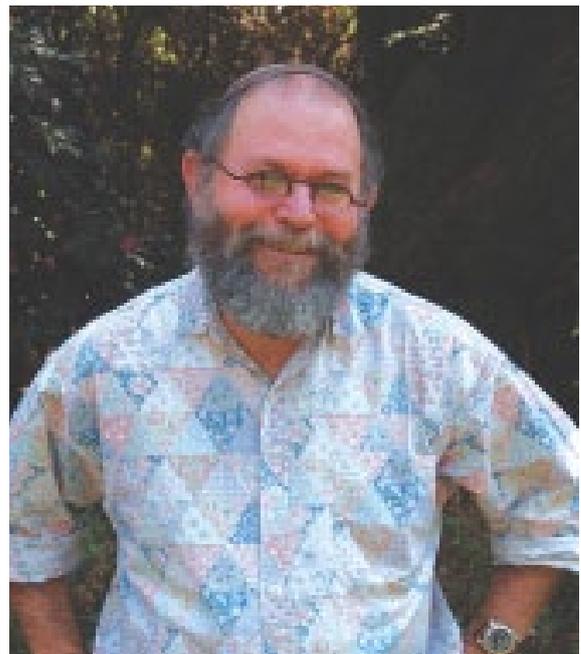
Misunderstanding has made the task of educating people about HIV/Aids all the more difficult. Case in point: the role of nutrition. "Leading a balanced life with a mixed diet, avoiding lots of processed food, getting regular exercise and avoiding toxins like smoking and alcohol can help the body cope with infection," says Dr Evian, "but there's little evidence to support the idea that it will improve your health once you are infected. All it will do is put you in a stronger position to fight the disease."

Brave new world

"The decision to provide ARVs is really about being a responsible and compassionate employer," Glendinning concludes. "This goes right to the heart of who we are: we have the resources to assist in fighting HIV/AIDS and where better to allocate these than to our people?" ■



Steve Glendinning, Group Human Capital Executive



Dr Clive Evian, Aids Management Specialist