

## HIV/AIDS: TREATMENT

Many people living with HIV/AIDS feel they are faced with a dilemma when it comes to treatment. Antiretrovirals have been approved as the most effective drugs in making the immune system stronger but many people still choose traditional medicine instead. In taking a look at the role of traditional healers in the treatment of HIV positive patients, we find out how one HIV-positive person copes with traditional medicine and ARVs...

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[i'm using both not because it makes me happy. it's not nice. I want to see my blood testing negative. I only use traditional medicine like i did before not because i have HIV. In the olden days traditional medicine was used not because someone is sick.]

For Princess, not her real name, living with the HI-virus is a battle both physically and psychologically. The school teacher from Ndwedwe, north of Durban, is worried about getting sick, dying and leaving behind her eleven-year-old daughter.

She was put on anti-retrovirals by her private doctor but, desperate to get better, and hoping even to be cured, she felt they were not enough. With assurances that she will be alright, she accepted a secret concoction from her traditional healer, which he said would treat the disease. She's been mixing the two sets of medication for almost three years now. After her most recent tests, she says the results have come back with the virus undetected. Now Princess is at a cross roads, confused and not understanding what this means....

Ups [If I had met Mthiyane first I would have not gone for the ARV treatment. Now it is not easy to stop either. I'll rather wait for the doctors to hear what they say in my next check up.]

**Princess has never told her doctor about the traditional medicine treatment, for fear of what he would say. Medical doctors, Aids experts and activists caution against using antiretroviral treatment with other remedies, fearing that the body might build up resistance to the medications. Medical officer at the GJ Crooks Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal and Antiretroviral Treatment clinic manager at the hospital, Dr Karen Volke, explains...**

**ups [The problem is that only two herbal medicines have been studied, that we know what the interaction is. The one is the hypoxis and the other is suntherlandia. And we know that with those there are drug interactions and so they shouldn't be used together because there are as yet no guidelines as to how they can be used together. In terms of the rest of the traditional medicines we explain to the people that because there haven't been studies we don't know what it's going to do so we advice them not to be used together.]**

**Princess's traditional healer, however, has no such problems. He approves of her taking his remedy with the ARVs. Makhosi Chris Mthiyane says his remedy is made of pure herbs and therefore it is not dangerous...**

**Ups.....[four or five days later the patient comes back with better results. Maybe he didn't eat and now he's starting to eat]**

**People with various illnesses, including high blood pressure, arthritis and other common sicknesses, come to Makhosi Mthiyane's home in rural Ogunjini area, north of Durban for medical assistance.**

**(fx fx an elderly woman asking if she can get her arthritis medication fx fx) Unlike this woman, others he consults with them secretly in one of the rooms in his house for confidentiality reasons. In a day more than five people disappear behind the white door adjacent to the lounge.**

**He says most of his patients are HIV positive, demanding his allegedly life prolonging muthi. Princess is one of the hundreds he says he has treated with his concoction. This dark liquid mixture of herbs costs them fifty rands per 750 ml bottle.**

**Makhosi Mthiyane encourages Princess to get tested and bring the results to him so that he can also keep track of her health and the disease....**

**Ups [I'm not equipped to do the tests to make sure that the CD4 count is alright or the viral load is okay. I can't say that, so the only way is to say just keep taking the stuff. When you get the money, check your CD4 count. I advise that because it makes me happy when the person comes back to say I was ready for ARVs but took your stuff now I don't qualify.]**

**While Princess and Makhosi Mthiyane say the results of an undetected virus in her system may be a sign of her being cured, Dr Volke disagrees. She says this is highly unlikely as it will take more than just a couple of tests to determine this...**

**[Because the way we detect that the person has aids is by detecting the anti bodies through the infection the person has made. If the tests comes back negative, it would mean the person no longer has antibody to the hiv in his body. That would mean a bad thing because antibodies are a person's immunity to the infection which is successful in keeping it at bay before the person gets aids. One cannot use the rapid test to determine whether the person has been cured. If the viral load test undetectable..its hiding in the body. So it would be very difficult to day. ]**

**Side effects caused by ARVs have been well documented and publicised. Less exposed are the effects of various traditional medicine mixtures for HIV-positive patients already on ARVs. Medical practitioners, traditional healers and people living with HIV/AIDS alike agree that this area has not been well researched. Desperate for help, Princess says this must be done sooner rather than later. She says this will enable people to make well informed decisions on the treatment they prefer. SOQ.**