

## **POLICY**

**The integration of traditional medicine into the health sector has been moving at a snail's pace. This is despite the fact that about eighty percent of South Africans use traditional healers. However, the controversy surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the country and rising prevalence of the disease is forcing government to fast track the changes to have better control of the traditional health sector. The Traditional Health Practitioners' Act was passed in 2004 but is yet to be implemented. In our final part of a four part series we take a look at progress made...**

## **TEXT:**

**(hospital sound)HIV/AIDS is a disease that's keeping doctors.....(traditional healer sound effects)and traditional healers busy. Trevor Majoro understands very well the struggle of these practitioners in their respective health sectors to manage and treat it. He is an HIV/AIDS clinician at the Wits University's Reproductive Health Unit....and a traditional medical practitioner.....**

**Majoro - [being in a position where I'm exposed to both made me realize that the two can complement each other. The two can synergize their efforts that are aimed at primary recipient of the services we provide]**

**At the RHU Majoro is involved with the antiretroviral treatment roll out. At home he continues to practice as a traditional healer.....**

**Ups[I understand the culture and the practice of traditional people. I know that ancestors are not evil. On a regular basis I do have conversations with my late maternal grandfather.]**

**Majoro says healers must be given information about the disease. He believes they can play a major roll in the roll out of ARV treatment.....**

**Majoro - [In terms of HIV and Aids I see traditional medical practitioners very important because in Africa 80 percent of people consult them. They've become first point of contact. So it's important that they know what is going on with HIV and AIDS. They should be part of the trainings that are going on anywhere in the world so that they become relevant to their client.]**

Using his knowledge as an HIV/AIDS clinician, Majoro has trained some of his colleagues in the traditional medical practitioners' field in Johannesburg.

Various other training programmes are underway to educate healers about the disease.

fx fx (traditional healers singing and dancing) At Mtubatuba, on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal, it's a day of celebration for these traditional healers. They have completed an eight month training programme on the management of HIV/AIDS, STIs and TB.

(fx fx traditional healer - We have to understand everything, more especially these new diseases, HIV, TB fx fx)

Seventy five healers from the uMkhanyakude district municipality participated in the training provided by the African Medical Research Foundation South Africa. They will now be able to identify HIV/AIDS symptoms in patients and refer them for a diagnosis. With funds from the European Union, a Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) center has also been built. It will be managed by a trained nurse. The healers will refer patients to the centre for testing. Triphina Ngwenya is the project manager in the area..

Nywenya - [What is interesting about traditional healers is that they don't let a patient lose hope. most ppl don't die because they are ill but they die coz they lose hope, they are not cared for at home. But if they are there to support them, to encourage them to live positively, they'll be playing a major role. Since we've trained them on STIs they've been able to take ups condoms and distributing them in their practices. and people are taking those condoms because we've trained them on how to use a condom and also have the condoms available in their practices.]

While there is progress - attempts to fully include traditional healers in the public health sector are progressing slowly.

The Traditional Health Practitioners' Act was passed in 2004 after it was proposed in 1998. But its implementation has hit another setback. In August this year the constitutional court declared the Act invalid on grounds that not enough consultation was done before passing the Bill.

**This has also stalled the establishment of a statutory council as a watchdog body for healers, who will have to register with it. President of the KwaZulu-Natal Traditional Healers Association, Sazi Mhlongo, says charlatans who have tainted the image of traditional healers will be exposed and dealt with by the council...**

**Mhlongo - [we must be brought together with the department of health because we are all engaged in healing and we do not want people who claim to be healers not to be checked. If we meet with the department of health these people that are cheating people will be brought to book. There are people that are claiming to be healers when they are not. They are killing people]**

**Due to the absence of a formal regulatory framework, criminal activities and exploitation of desperate people continue, in the name of healing. In September, three traditional healers in Limpopo were sentenced to life in prison for ritual killings and attempted murder. They had removed body parts from two people, one of whom died. Mhlongo says a healer does not use human body parts.**

**But where does this leave traditional herbal medicine in the treatment of HIV/Aids patients? According to the Act a person not registered as a traditional health practitioner under the Council cannot claim to cure HIV/AIDS. They may also not diagnose or treat patients.**

**Majoro supports the use of ARVs in the treatment of HIV/AIDS patients.....**

**Ups [We shouldn't be naïve of the fact that most of the scientific evidence we have has been proven, which makes it reputable and gives it the credibility it deserves. In terms of our traditional medicines there hasn't been such done to any bigger event. That is why we say traditional healers should be afforded the opportunity to test their claims to see what works so that safety, efficacy and drug interaction could be established.]**

**The Medical Research Council conducted a study on the accessibility and effectiveness of traditional healers as supervisors of TB treatment between 1999 and 2000 in KwaHlabisa, KwaZulu-Natal. It found that more patients supervised by healers completed their treatment compared to those supervised through clinics. Ngwenya says healers could potentially be used in the same way in the treatment of HIV/AIDS patients.**

**While there is consensus that traditional medicines must be tested scientifically to establish their safety and efficacy - Majoro, Ngwenya and Mhlongo are among many who are willing to prove that healers do have a role to play in the South African health care system and the fight against HIV/AIDS.**