

TRADITIONAL HEALERS on board to fight HIV/AIDS

Traditional healers can play an important role in the prevention, care and treatment of HIV infection and AIDS, according to a study commissioned by the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Department of Health, writes NOLWANDLE MNGQUNDANISO.

AN HSRC TEAM, lead by research director Professor Karl Peltzer, investigated a whole range of issues concerning traditional healers, their knowledge about HIV/AIDS, prevention, care and treatment. The researchers developed training material, a clinical referral system for traditional healers, and methods to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions by traditional healers.

The research involved 233 traditional healers (161 in an experimental group and 72 in a control group), 19 nurses, and 33 community health workers. The experimental group received training whereas the control group, who received information booklets, did not.

The majority of the traditional healers in both groups could be classified as diviners (59% in the experimental and 39% in the control group), followed by herbalists (15% and 29% respectively) and diviner-herbalists (13% and 22% respectively).

A training manual was compiled, called *Traditional healing and STI/HIV/AIDS/TB in South Africa: A trainer's manual for traditional health practitioners, community health workers and nurses* and is waiting for approval from the national Department of Health, when it will be translated into other languages.

Before the training started, the traditional healers were asked about the five most common conditions they treat. These were sexually transmitted infections (72%), arthritis or rheumatism (43%), stroke (36%), headache (31%), sores (30%), children's problems (24%), ancestral problems (23%), sharp pains (22%), spirit illness (21%) and stomach problems (21%). Only a few (6%) mentioned HIV/AIDS.

Although most healers had correct knowledge of the major HIV transmission routes (multiple sexual partners, blood contact, reusing needles or razors), prevention methods (condom use), and that antiretroviral treatment has to be taken for life, their knowledge

was poorer on other HIV transmission routes (breast feeding, oral sex, and dry sex). Their knowledge of HIV/AIDS myths, such as having sex with a virgin, was also poor. This was also the case concerning their knowledge of the nature of HIV/AIDS – for example, that someone with HIV could still look healthy, or that there was no cure for HIV/AIDS.

The first four-day training session took place in May 2004, followed by another five training sessions. The experimental and control groups were assessed before the training and again seven to nine months later.

The results showed an attitude change in nurses and healthcare workers towards traditional healers, and the discussions during training helped to promote understanding among the groups. Encouragingly, 99.1% of traditional healers in the experimental and 100% in the control group indicated that they are prepared to work with medical health practitioners.

Before training started, HIV knowledge was not significantly different between the experimental and the control group. Following training, the experimental group had significantly increased HIV knowledge as compared to the control group, and after training almost all traditional healers approved of distributing condoms to clients. They also reduced risk-practices such as performing incisions or scarifications. Only 2% had used the same razor blade for scarifications in the three-month period before follow-up, and only 5% used an enema on patients without sterilisation during the same period.

Traditional healers improved and retained their knowledge of HIV/AIDS/TB, even seven to nine months after their training. They reduced their HIV risk-practices and played an important role in giving culturally acceptable sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV/AIDS assessment, counselling and community education. The research showed that involving traditional healers in future HIV/AIDS programmes could further strengthen their contribution. ●

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Traditional healers and nurses express their appreciation in dance at one of the training sessions.

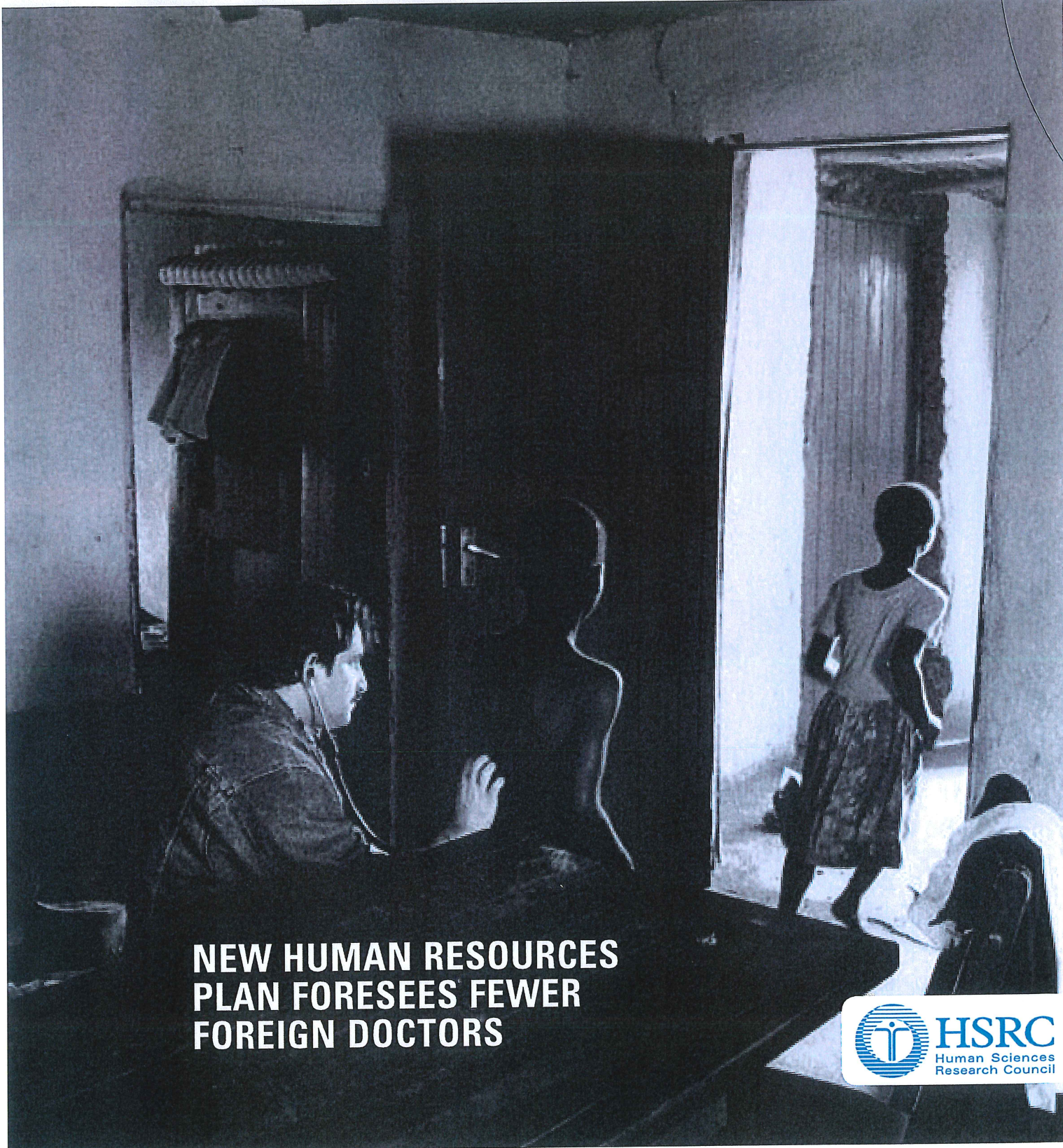
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