

Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health

South Africa leads in the number of people living with HIV/AIDS with 4.7 million people infected. The epidemic in South Africa, like in all sub-Saharan countries, is no longer confined to specific high-risk groups. It is a major cause of illness, a burden on the health care system, and is having a visible impact on the country's workforce, productivity and skills base. Children are also one of the major casualties of HIV/AIDS.

The Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health (SAHA) is a national HSRC research programme established in July 2001. The main areas of interest are:

- social epidemiology of HIV/AIDS
- epidemiology and demography
- public health
- health economics
- a research alliance on social aspects of HIV/AIDS

Within one year of the establishment of SAHA, a comprehensive research programme on social aspects of HIV/AIDS and public health is emerging. It now has 28 staff members, including a number of historically disadvantaged South African students who are currently completing their masters degree. SAHA has formed links with national, international and multi-lateral organisations, and is establishing a network of scientists across southern Africa through the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance (SAHARA).

Current and recently completed projects

The Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance (SAHARA): The HSRC established SAHARA in August 2001 as a broad-based research network throughout Africa, with a flexible alliance of research partners, committed to conducting and supporting quality research for urgent implementation. The objectives of SAHARA are:

- to establish an effective and dynamic network among researchers to facilitate peer review, information exchange, and joint or complementary research initiatives between countries and at the Southern African Development Community (SADC) meetings
 - to identify and assemble for dissemination, field-tested and documented "best practices" for replication in the SADC region
 - to produce a SADC periodic Journal of HIV/AIDS Social Research
 - to develop multi-site, multi-country research programmes aimed at informing policy on combatting the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa
 - to establish the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Information Portal, AfroAIDSnet, with the Medical Research Council (MRC)

The first annual conference of SAHARA will be held in Gauteng in



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September 2002.

HIV/AIDS situation in southern Africa: The project, involving Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, was funded by the WK Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) and a report was submitted in January 2002.

The objectives of the study were:

- to provide information necessary for understanding the HIV/AIDS problem in the SADC region
- to elucidate public policy and regulatory frameworks and their impact on community-based interventions
- to enable the WKKF to implement strategies and programmes at a regional level

A summary of the findings was presented at the Grant Makers Affinity Group meeting in New York, January 2002, attended by 27 funding organisations with programmes in Africa, and at a workshop organised by the WKKF in February 2002.

The major outcomes from the report were as follows:

- The HSRC/SAHA report placed HIV/AIDS firmly on the agenda of the WKKF, which prior to this report was not included in their

mandate.

- Phase 2 of the research was commissioned by the WKKF through the University of Zimbabwe, Centre for Applied Social Sciences.
- SAHA, with the Child, Youth and Family Development (CYFD) as a main partner, were funded by the WKKF to conduct HIV/AIDS research-driven interventions, aimed at implementing evidence-based programmes, focused on orphans and vulnerable children, their families and communities. The project started in July 2002 and is expected to end in 2006.

National survey on HIV/AIDS behavioural risks, HIV status, and mass media impact survey, 2002: For the first time ever, this survey will give an estimate of the true extent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa, based on a nationally representative household sample. Such information will contribute to settling the debate on the seriousness of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

It is funded by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and the HSRC, with the Swiss Agency for Development and Corporation financing part of the costs for the master sample.

The study will provide statistics on behaviour that facilitate or hinder HIV infection among South Africans - information essential for policy and planning. It will also provide information on the number of orphans and child-headed households. This project is in collaboration with the MRC, Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation and Family Health International (hereafter referred to as the HSRC-led Consortium). The results will be available end of October 2002.

The objective of a study on the impact of HIV/AIDS on the demographic structure and size of the South African population is to make future projections. It is funded by the Department of Social Development. A workshop to get consensus on methodology was held in November 2001, and brought together researchers and experts from the University of Cape Town, the MRC, Statistics South Africa, the Population Division of the Department of Social Development, the Department of Health, UNAIDS and Metropolitan Life.

Studies on the impact of HIV/AIDS on the health sector: This is a joint project between the HSRC and the National School of Public Health, Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA). It is funded by the Department of Health and the United States Government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It incorporates five separate studies to be completed in October 2002, and will:

- determine HIV/AIDS-related morbidity and mortality of health professionals and health workers
- estimate morbidity and mortality of patients and determine their demographic profile
- determine the services that are most severely affected by HIV/AIDS
- determine the impact of HIV/AIDS on human resources





- estimate the cost of a programme to prevent mother-to-child HIV/AIDS transmission (PMTCT)

Assessment of the PMTCT programme in Gauteng: This nationally-driven programme commenced with a pilot programme in Gauteng in May 2001, and is due for completion in August 2002. The Gauteng provincial government is funding the HSRC to expand the pilot phase of the programme to assess, evaluate and make recommendations at four pilot sites.

Future developments

Research to improve implementation of the PMTCT in the Eastern Cape: This study will be undertaken jointly with MEDUNSA's National School of Public Health. The aims are to identify and remove barriers to effective implementation of the PMTCT programme, and to estimate the effectiveness and costs of these interventions. The project would take approximately three years.

Psychosocial correlates of substance use and HIV/AIDS risk in South African women: This single sample, correlational survey study is designed to examine exposure to community violence and racism (perceived psychosocial stressor); psychological functioning (depression, hopelessness, anger); substance use (alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs); HIV/AIDS prevention knowledge; and risk behaviours in a sample of 400 black women in South Africa.

The data will be collected from women attending medical clinics serving low-income families in Cape Town. This study is a joint undertaking with Howard University in Washington, DC. The National Institute of Drug Abuse will fund it for two years.

Community-based HIV/AIDS survey of men and women living in Guguletu township: This community-based survey will examine the cultural beliefs and information, motivation and behaviour in relation to sexual transmission risks among adult South Africans living in Guguletu township in Cape Town. The study will be conducted among 250 men and 250 women over the age of 18 years. The study is undertaken jointly with the University of Connecticut and the Medical College of Wisconsin in the US. It is funded through a developmental research grant from the Center for AIDS Intervention Research at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

It is expected that higher levels of exposure to violence and racism will be related to higher levels of psychological distress, higher levels of substance use, and lower levels of AIDS-prevention knowledge.

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