

Improving Health: TAC at work - 10 years of ARVs, "Those who are sick come to TAC for help"

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On Friday, 3 June 2011, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) Khayelitsha, (MSF), City of Cape Town and the Western Cape Provincial Government Department of Health celebrated the 10 year anniversary of the first public sector Antiretroviral Treatment program in South Africa. Today, approximately 20,000 people in Khayelitsha are on ARV treatment.

Kicking off the celebrations three days earlier, staff at the Ubuntu Clinic in Khayelitsha ? a leading provider of integrated TB and HIV care - staged a play, acting out the struggle that brought ARVs to the community. The play showed the fight against the previous South African government?s denialism; the opportunistic and false claims of vitamin salesman Mathias Rath; and the revolution of getting ARVs into the country in 2001. TAC?s advocacy and legal struggle for Prevention of Mother to Child transmission (PMTCT) treatment during the same period was also acknowledged.

Despite the successes of the past ten years, many challenges remain. An estimated 80,000 of the 500,000 residents of Khayelitsha are HIV positive. A significant number of these are in need of treatment but not receiving it.

Just like 10 years ago, TAC and MSF?s work in Khayelitsha still provide a useful model for rolling out ARV treatment in high HIV prevalence communities. TAC?s Khayelitsha office provides treatment and prevention literacy education, runs TB workshops, and helps run various support groups for the community. At the same time, the organization works to monitor public healthcare service provision to ensure that people with HIV/AIDS have access to appropriate services.

?Those who are sick, now come to the TAC and ask for help,? says Aubrey Mcameni from Khayelitsha. Echoing similar sentiments, Mcedisi Nodzube, a TAC member says that lately people have been coming to TAC first instead of the clinics to seek advice on HIV. ?TAC provides information and information is power, especially when one is looking to access high quality healthcare services. By raising awareness, promoting knowledge of one?s status and providing support group sectors, there is less stigma surrounding access to treatment and more knowledge about where and how to get treatment, care and support.?

Through the implementation of peer educator programs, gender based violence advocacy and condom distribution, TAC Community Health Advocates with the help of Community Health Workers are working towards a better community understanding of HIV prevention and treatment. The aim of these activities are to reduce the rate of new infections in the community. Condom distribution has been particularly successful with an average of half a million condoms distributed every month.

Even with the current political will to provide treatment, and even as we are celebrating ten years of ARVs, the challenges before us remain immense. We still have far too many new infections and far too many people who are in need of treatment are not accessing it. TAC will continue to campaign for comprehensive healthcare services for people

living with HIV/AIDS, both in Khayelitsha, and in South Africa as a whole.

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