

Research

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More than 83,500 children in South Africa have inherited HIV from their mothers. Two million are predicted to be orphans by 2015. Already, children as young as 12 are heads of households, struggling to care for siblings who in all likelihood are HIV-positive.

Out of a population of almost 40 million, 4.74 million South Africans are living with the virus. The epidemic threatens to wipe out a generation, deplete the labor force and shatter the economy of Africa's most prosperous and stable nation.

In preparation for World AIDS Day on Sunday, the United Nations reported last week that nearly 1 in 11 adults in sub-Saharan Africa is infected with the virus — 58 percent of them women.

Playing God

Bolton found the daily emotional pain of treating children with HIV or AIDS almost too much to bear.

"When I got home, I would spend more time crying than anything else," the pediatrician said, explaining why she decided to become a clinical researcher.

Bolton said the worst part is "playing God" and having to decide which children should be given the limited supply of antiretroviral drugs. "For every patient I can successfully treat, there are 12 I can't treat and who will die from AIDS."

Now Bolton is a clinical researcher with the University of Witwatersrand, Perinatal HIV Research Unit, helping conduct trials on ways to prevent mother-child transmission of the virus.

She still stays in touch with her patients, giving them a private cell-phone number so they can call and tell her what they did at school, or talk about how sick they feel.

The research unit recently received

\$21.3 million from the U.S. government to help the search for affordable HIV/AIDS treatment by financing trials involving 100 people infected with the virus. The money helps, but billions of dollars are needed if cheaper and more effective ways of stemming the virus are to be found.

"Operational research is running out of money," Bolton said. "There are 100 on the program, but if the money runs out, I can't think what will happen. We will have given hope but may have to pull the carpet out from under their feet."

Save the children

The Perinatal HIV Research Unit is based at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto — the largest hospital in the Southern Hemisphere, with about 3,300 beds. Nearly 200 patients are admitted daily.

Research includes prevention of mother-to-child transmission through the use of the drug nevirapine. The drug has proved successful in reducing the number of HIV-positive infants in South Africa, but early government opposition slowed aggressive distribution.

Susan is typical of the women in the research program. She received nevirapine during labor and is banking on the treatment to save her baby. So far, 3-month-old Lunga — which means "good boy" in Zulu — has tested negative for the virus.

The 32-year-old woman, who would not give her last name, said she was afraid of what would happen if her boyfriend found out she had been to the clinic. She is secretly bottle-feeding Lunga rather than risk infecting him with breast milk.

"When I was pregnant, it was hard," said Susan, who has three other children. "I was too scared to tell my boyfriend I had AIDS. My mother helps me with the bottle feeding so we can keep it a secret."

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