

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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Task team to address nutrition for people living with Aids

A task team has been formed following an initiative by the Children in Distress (Cindi) network and Life Line in Pietermaritzburg in an effort to address the nutrition of people living with Aids and other vulnerable groups, such as children and the elderly, who are living in impoverished communities. Debbie Harrison of Life Line said at a recent workshop that was convened to raise awareness about possible creative interventions that could be launched from empty houses owned by Life Line and Rape Crisis in Pietermaritzburg.

Fiona Ross from the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg said that good nutrition and food security was important for people living with Aids. Good nutrition enhances the patient's ability to resist infections and is important for stabilising the weight of patients. According to Ross, in order to maintain and improve nutrition there are many issues to take into account. These include the food intake itself, preventing and treating infection, appropriate care including stimulation and active feeding of children, access to food and household food security, care, access to basic services such as health services, water and sanitation, as well as education.

Ross said that there is a cyclic relationship between HIV/Aids and nutrition. An individual with poor nutritional status has a weakened immune system and thus decreased ability to fight any infection, including HIV, which then makes the person more vulnerable to infections. These infections in turn result in an increase in nutritional needs, but at the same time the person often has a reduced appetite and decreased food intake as well as an increased loss of nutrients due to the disease processes. As a result the nutritional status of the person is reduced even more and the cycle continues.

According to Ross, good nutrition means eating foods that supply the body with all the nutrients that are needed daily. A person who is infected with the virus that causes Aids has increased needs, particularly with regard to proteins, energy, vitamins and minerals. It is important that the body gets the right balance of these so that they can all be used effectively in the body.

Good nutrition, Ross said helps to keep weight stable - increased morbidity and mortality can result from even a 5% weight loss - and prevent the weight loss that is often the event that begins a vicious cycle of increased tiredness and decreased physical activity, including the inability to prepare and consume food. Good nutrition also helps prevent muscle loss and maintain strength, replaces lost nutrients, may prolong the time between HIV infection and progression to Aids, improves wound healing, results in faster recovery from infections and enables a person to better deal with medication and treatment.

Ross emphasised the importance of good nutrition practices starting as early as possible for the

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full benefits to be felt. She said that once a person's nutritional well-being is compromised it becomes more and more difficult for the person to catch up later.

According to biochemist David Figenschou, nutrients including vitamin B12, folic acid, vitamin B6 and thiamine are particularly important supplements that have been found to lengthen the time between the symptomatic stage of HIV and the onset of full blown Aids.

Several people involved in projects aimed at improving nutrition made presentations at the workshop. Mabongi Mtshali from the Natal Museum has formulated a chlorophyll drink, which she calls "green blood" from vegetables and herbs. She was originally involved in a vegetable gardening project in Edendale and has since introduced herbs to the project.

Riaan Janeke of Africa Foods said that E-pap has been strongly endorsed by the non-governmental organisation Community Aids Response, which is associated with the Health Sciences faculty of Wits University. E-pap is a fortified, pre-cooked instant porridge that can be mixed with water, milk, maas or yoghurt. It can be made in any desired consistency and can be effective as a liquid energy drink for people with thrush or mouth sores. Community agents can distribute E-pap and schools, hospices and non-governmental organisations are already using the product.

Janeke said that in schools where the porridge is being given to pupils, the cost to parents has been about R4 per week. It has resulted in increased attendance by the children and has increased concentration spans of the pupils. The estimated cost for a person consuming the porridge twice a day is R50 a month.

Food and Trees for Africa representative Barathi Tugh said that her organisation originally distributed trees to disadvantaged communities, but had expanded to include urban greening and environmental awareness. The organisation focused on training people to use their own natural habitats in a productive way in order to produce healthy food.

Another project concerned with the production of food was presented by Jason de Leur of the Organic Farm Group and Feed the People. The organisation promotes an organic, vertical growing system for producing vegetables on a commercially viable scale. This enables people who use the system to grow sufficient vegetables for themselves and to create a business venture.

Gavin MacGregor said that the mission of the Heifer Project was to alleviate hunger, poverty and environmental degradation through education and training in sustainable animal production, providing livestock and related services and raising public awareness and concern for poverty and environmental degradation. The project focuses sustainable development by offering training which helps people obtain a vision for their own lives. Participants are obliged to pass on the gift of the first female offspring of their animals to another needy family in the same community.

The nutrition task team will meet in March to draw up a nutrition action plan that would incorporate the use of the empty buildings on the Life Line property. Cindi's co-ordinator Yvonne Spain said that she envisages that the network could pilot projects and that the buildings could be used as resource centres.

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