

Aids victims stop ARVs to get grants

Welfare criteria force choice between long-term health and food for family

'The minute people get healthy, we take away the only means of survival they know'

PREGA GOVENDER

DRIVEN by sheer poverty, scores of desperate Aids victims are refusing life-saving treatment to get social grants. Several organisations this week confirmed that many HIV-positive South Africans were risking their lives by defaulting on their antiretroviral (ARV) treatment for a temporary disability grant of R1010 a month.

The Aids Consortium, which represents more than 1000 non-governmental and community-based organisations, and the National Association of People Living with HIV and Aids said they had received reports of people refusing to take ARVs because they believed they would qualify for the grants if their CD4 blood cell count was low enough.

Although the Department of Social Development denies that blood count is used as a yardstick for awarding the disability grant, a study by the Human Sciences Research Council in the Eastern Cape, involving 607 Aids sufferers, found that all respondents perceived it to be the main criterion.

In addition, Dr Helmut Fritsche, a primary healthcare practitioner in the Eastern Cape, also said that doctors were still using the CD4 blood cell count and viral load of applicants as criteria to recommend them for grants.

"A CD4 count of 200 and less was generally used (as a yardstick)," he said.

Fritsche said guidelines from the Department of Social Development in the Eastern Cape required the results of the applicant's CD4 count and viral load as a baseline. He said interrupting ARV treatment was dangerous as it could result in a recurrence of serious lung problems, a combination of lung and stomach problems, gastroenteritis and serious skin diseases. Fritsche added: "They say 'let me be sick a little bit and I will get my food via a disability grant'. This is the painful truth."

The Sunday Times has a list of 288 Aids sufferers from just one district in Limpopo, who have been defaulting on their treatment since last year — many in a bid to qualify for the grant. Maligana Mashudu, 28, from Thohoyandou, stopped taking ARVs between October last year and February in an attempt to lower her CD4 blood count so her grant could be reinstated. Mashudu, whose husband is also HIV-positive, has a 10-year-old daughter. "When my application was reviewed in August, I was told my CD4 blood cell count, which was 595, was too high and I couldn't qualify for the grant again," she said.

Mashudu was forced to continue with her ARV medication in February after she became violently ill. She has not reapplied for a grant since. Meanwhile, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), which administers grants on behalf of the Department of Social Development, confirmed it would be investigating doctors who turned down applicants without physically examining them. SASSA's chief executive Fezile Makiwane said: "If the person hasn't been examined, it's illegal. They (doctors) are breaking the law and it's an offence."

There are an estimated 700 000 Aids victims on ARV treatment across South Africa. Without the grants, many do not have the taxi fare to collect their medication.

Tian Johnson, the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme's advocacy officer, said a significant number of people were going to default on their treatment because they wouldn't be able to collect their medication or afford

food, which is vital when the medication is taken.

“We are shooting ourselves in the foot. We are showing these people that the minute you get healthy, the minute your CD4 cell count goes up, we will take away the only means of survival you know,” said Johnson.