



Abbott, Tanzania open high-tech HIV treatment facility

By SUKHDEV CHHATBAR

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DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania (AP) - President Benjamin Mkapa and Abbott Laboratories CEO Miles White opened a state-of-the-art outpatient center and clinical laboratory in Tanzania's capital on Thursday as part of a major program to improve HIV treatment in East Africa.

The facilities at Muhimbili National Hospital are part of a nationwide program to improve the health care infrastructure in Tanzania, not only for the estimated 2 million people who have HIV, but for all Tanzanians seeking medical care.

The Abbott Fund, the charitable arm of the North Chicago, Ill.-based pharmaceutical company, has invested \$35 million in Tanzania's health system since 2001, mostly to train health workers and buy equipment for the country's notoriously ill-equipped and poorly-staffed hospitals and clinics.

The investment is part of the ongoing debate in Africa over how to best treat the 25 million people who have HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Some aid agencies have called on making cheap, generic versions of patented drugs more readily available immediately through more simplified diagnostic and treatment regimens.

Major pharmaceutical companies have said such a move could lead to drug resistance and have instead focused on improving medical training and hospital facilities before making their brand-name drugs available.

"Our work in Tanzania represents our company's commitment to social responsibility," White said. "By modernizing the facilities, improving hospital management and training staff, we are fundamentally expanding the country's capacity to provide quality testing and treatment of HIV and other lifelong diseases."

In the last four years, working through the Axios health management company and the government, the program has trained 1,300 health workers in HIV patient care, expanded the voluntary testing program and upgraded facilities, systems and training at 82 hospitals, clinics and dispensaries across the country, Miles said.

Tanzania has one doctor for every 24,000 patients, Minister for Health Anna Abdallah said. She said the government planned to train 10,000 more doctors by 2006 with funding from the Clinton Foundation, but that the Abbott program would also continue to improve other facilities in the country.

"The project ... is significant because there will be no discrimination in treating the patients for HIV or other illnesses," she said. "In the past, we had special treatment for the HIV patients which caused the problem of stigmatization."

In the northern town of Arusha, Dr. Sedute Zuhura runs the regional HIV treatment program, which has benefited from the Abbott program. After witnessing her sister's death from AIDS in 2002, she now sees hope in treating HIV patients.

"I lost my sister because we had no access and knowledge of the drugs," Zuhura said. But she said now she has 344 patients on life-prolonging anti-retroviral drugs and their health is improving.

In the past, similar programs have done well in the beginning, only to fall apart after supply lines dried up or equipment was not properly maintained. Everyone involved in this program has said a comprehensive maintenance program and continuous training are part of the project.

"Things have changed, governments have changed and attitudes have changed -- and maintenance and upkeep of health facilities is now part of the culture," the health minister said. But she said her government will require ongoing financial support and a steady stream of pharmaceuticals.

"This is not something that the governments can do alone," Abdallah said.

AP PHOTO ONLINE:



Zuhura Sedute, right, doctor in charge of HIV/AIDS Programme at the Mount Meru regional hospital in Arusha, Tanzania, attending to a HIV/AIDS positive patient at the Mount Meru Regional Hospital, Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2005. President Benjamin Mkapa and Miles White, the CEO of US company Abbott Laboratories, opened a state-of-the-art outpatient center and clinical laboratory in Tanzania's capital on Thursday as part of a major program