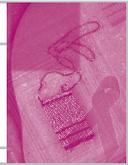


AIDS and politics



This edition of the *South African Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* contains data confirming what we as a profession have feared. The more facts we gather, the worse the truth is about HIV/AIDS.

The epidemic is not yielding to our existing strategies. Individual medical organisations are doing their best, but we seem to find no champions in the government.

My international experience

In the dark days of apartheid I attended international conferences and felt embarrassed by my country's politics.

I said the government had it wrong – seriously wrong.

I said apartheid was an ideological depravity, but the politicians denied it – and scolded anyone who pointed it out to them.

I said it could not prevail, as their stance was immoral.

At least everyone I spoke to in the profession thought the government had indefensible logic.

Now when I travel to international conferences I feel embarrassed by my country's politics on HIV/AIDS.

I say the government has it wrong – seriously wrong.

I say their denialist attitudes cannot prevail because they are unscientific and immoral.

At least everyone I ever speak to believes they are wrong – but I know there are people who support their indefensible logic.

Teaching

During apartheid I taught medical students that the government's policies on racism were wrong. They were political science, not medical science.

Now I teach medical students that the government is again wrong, this time about HIV/AIDS. That the mixed messages about poverty and nutritional obfuscation are not medical science but political science. I teach them that the disease should be prevented by education of our population at every opportunity. That HIV/AIDS is a chronic disease that can be treated with antiretroviral drugs.

Science

The HIV virus is the most studied micro-organism that has ever existed. Medical science knows more about it than any virus in history. We know its origin, its identification, replication, epidemiology and treatment. It is not a mystery disease because more has been published on it than any other disease – ever.

We know it is the single most important threat to health in South Africa.

Read the maternal mortality figures in this journal. Read how it is killing the women of this country. Read how we as a profession – and a specialty – are failing to stem the tide. Read the information and tell me our government is mounting a satisfactory response.

We need every child to be taught about responsible behaviour.

We need every pregnant woman to be tested for HIV and be treated.

We need every HIV-positive person to be supported and treated.

We need a leader to fight the disease – not speaking with a forked tongue and berating those who differ in their approach.

Politics

Doctors are not good politicians. They are conservative animals who lack the verbal rhetoric to pound opponents who disagree with them. They let the scientific evidence be their scalpels and expect logical responses from their patients and treat them as partners in caring for themselves.

We are faced with irrefutable evidence that our political masters are committed to policies that are not robust enough. The political will to tackle HIV/AIDS is not there.

The present Minister of Health seems incapable of providing the leadership required.

The late unlamented P W Botha will be remembered for all the wrong reasons. The Minister of Health should stand aside before she is remembered for the wrong reasons too.

Perhaps the Deputy Minister's speech about embracing medical science's advances is as much as she dares say. The medical profession agrees with the Deputy Minister.

Perhaps the Cabinet's reallocation of portfolios is the best they can do without losing face.

The medical profession wants more, because people are losing their lives.

We need a new political champion.

The women of South Africa would be most grateful.

Athol Kent

Editor

atholkent@mweb.co.za

This is a personal view of the Editor. However, it was shown to the Heads of the eight academic Departments of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in South Africa, and all but one publicly or privately endorse the content and sentiments expressed.