

Medical aid group raises alarm about AIDS funding

November 5 2009, By DONNA BRYSON , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The global recession and pressure to divert funds to other health crises are hurting the fight against AIDS, a medical group warned Thursday, with one health worker saying he feared a return to the days when the AIDS virus was a death sentence in Africa.

Medecins Sans Frontieres campaigners said at a news conference in Johannesburg that clinics funded by international donors in Uganda were being told not to take on new patients. MSF, also known as Doctors Without Borders, said they feared a major global distributor of [AIDS](#) money was considering cutting back worldwide.

HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is a major concern in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa has the world's largest number of HIV cases, with some 5.7 million people infected with the virus, according to the United Nations' AIDS agency.

"We think we are at a very dangerous turning point," said Dr. Tido von Schoen-Angerer, director of the aid group's campaign to provide essential medicines. "The donors are getting cold feet about commitment to longterm, chronic disease."

He said he has been told that donors wanted to spend on "cheap and easy" illnesses rather than AIDS, which can mean a lifelong commitment to providing expensive drugs.

MSF said the directors of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis

and Malaria would decide next week whether funding shortfalls would prevent them from taking on new programs. The fund provides a quarter of all international financing for AIDS, two-thirds for tuberculosis and three-quarters for malaria.

A top U.S. AIDS initiative was also faltering, the aid group said. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR as the project started by former President George W. Bush is known, plans to keep funding at current levels for the next two years, even though needs are growing, MSF said.

Officials from the Global Fund and PEPFAR did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Other health officials echoed the call for more funding.

Philip Stevens, a public health specialist at the International Policy Network in London, said it was time for "a dispassionate look at how the limited amount of public funds available can save the most lives."

Olesi Ellemani Pasulani, an MSF clinical officer at a hospital in rural Malawi, gave a more passionate plea.

He said that when the group started working in the Thyolo area in 1997, there was only enough funding for AIDS education and counseling, which led to many deaths. The clinic began providing AIDS treatment drugs with Global Fund money in 2003, and by 2007 was getting them to everyone who needed them in Thyolo - some 18,000 patients, he said.

"We have seen patients who were bedridden going back to their lives," Pasulani said. "My plea to all of us: 'Let us be there for them, now and forever.'"

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