



**REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA**

**Official Address**

**by**

**Hon. Dr. Richard Nchabi Kamwi**

**Minister of Health and Social Services**

**On the occasion of the**

**Official launch of the novel “The Other Presence”**

**By Namibia’s Dr. Francis Sifiso Nyathi**

**27 May 2008**

**Windhoek**

**Programme Director**

**Madam Inge Zaamwani-Kamwi, President of NCCI**

**Mrs Tangeni Angula, CEO of the Namibia Institute of Pathology**

**Dr. Sifiso Nyathi, the author of the novel “The Other Presence”**

**Esteemed business leaders**

**Distinguished invited guests**

**Members of the Media**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

I am delighted to join you today in launching this book, an important tool in our ongoing efforts to demystify HIV/AIDS. The book being launched here signifies the author’s desire to contribute meaningfully to education and information sharing materials, especially targeted toward the youth highlighting the dangers of irresponsible behaviour which may lead to contracting diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The production of the book, *The Other Presence*, and its translation into local languages, are thus aimed at reducing the silence which has surrounded topics that have long been considered by traditional, religious and community leaders as being too sensitive to discuss.

The book is an interesting mixture of theological reflection and real life experiences. It is informative, challenging, provocative and will promote the debate that is necessary to overcome the myths that perpetuate ignorance. The book also thoroughly addresses the traditional myths and denial associated with the pandemic and calls for an action-oriented approach by the society in dealing with HIV/AIDS. For those who may not know, Dr Nyati has also authored internationally acclaimed plays: God of Women & Oracle of Gidino which also address the subject of stigma about HIV/AIDS.

I would like to congratulate Dr. Nyathi for this noble initiative and the excellent piece of work which he has produced. I am extremely impressed by his skilful writing and the manner in which he has used his talent in writing and his intellectual capacity to make such an outstanding contribution to the combating of HIV/AIDS. It is indeed encouraging to see young Namibians such as Dr. Nyathi producing such work of international quality and standard which can be used in our schools for the learning of languages in which this novel is written as well as to provide a unique tool for educating the society about the dangers of HIV/AIDS.

The initiative to write this novel, solely dedicated to HIV/AIDS is very commendable and must be supported by all Namibians. It educates us about HIV/AIDS, its consequences and prevention methods. It sends a very positive message about demystifying and de-stigmatising HIV/AIDS. The story of a US educated young man called Thomas in Chapter Six of the novel who decided to break the tradition of silence about AIDS related deaths in his society and prefer to encourage his people to stop blaming witchcraft and other mysterious causes of HIV or AIDS related deaths sounds very common in our own society.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

On page 25, Thomas tells his friend Kajah in no uncertain terms that the time was ripe for the society to accept that HIV/AIDS was real and was killing their own people. He said: “You see, you and I have a duty to demystify and de-stigmatise the whole AIDS issue. Our people are dying and if we remain silent about it and treat the disease as some sort of a mysterious issue, we will all perish. Come on now; don’t behave as if you are an old man whose philosophies of life are rooted in the mysteries of sorcery.”

What an example this character sets for the youth, and what a lesson he imparts to us all! Indeed, if we are to win in the fight against HIV/AIDS, we will have to confront the misconceptions and dangerous attitudes that surround the disease. Who better to champion this transformation than the youth, who are lively, open minded and conscientious? Therefore, I challenge the youth to spearhead the battle on all fronts, and emulate the example of Thomas. In the end Thomas saved elder Sinvula, who was accused of bewitching his nephew. And not just his uncle, but he reconciled the conflict that had been brewing between his family and friends enabling them to accept and deal with the reality of the disease.

This is the type of change in attitudes and beliefs that we would like to continue to see in Namibia as far as AIDS is concerned. We need to accept that HIV/AIDS is not a mystery and it is amongst us and killing many of our people especially the youth. We also need to accept that HIV/AIDS patients are not sinful and unwanted members of our society but anyone of us can become a victim of HIV/AIDS in one way or another.

Since the first case of HIV was reported in Namibia in 1986, the infection rate has been increasing and HIV/AIDS related deaths recorded have been growing in number. This is despite concerted efforts by the Government and other stakeholders aimed at providing as much information about HIV/AIDS as possible to the citizens so that they can be empowered to protect themselves against this pandemic. To this date, HIV/AIDS remains one of the most serious challenges which we must all fight and conquer with greater determination.

The Government's response to this pandemic is based on a broad multi-sectoral approach that integrates all stakeholders and major players into one overall national action framework. Prevention of the transmission of HIV remains the cornerstone of our national strategy to defeat the pandemic and a significant part of our efforts are geared towards preventing HIV transmission.

The Government is doing a lot of work to ensure that our message about prevention reaches a 100% of our population, especially young people whom we must educate extensively about prevention before they reach sexual active stages of their lives. For example, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defence have demonstrated marked success in the fight against HIV/AIDS through their programmes '*My*

*Future My Choice*, *Windows of Hope* and *MAPP* respectively. We commend these Ministries of Education which has been the driver of these programmes in our schools and armed forces to ensure that young and productive people are saved from contracting HIV.

### **Programme Director,**

In the same vein, the private sector is recording measurable success in the fight against HIV/AIDS through workplace programmes in particular, which are proving a very effective tool. For example, the Namibia Business Coalition on AIDS (NABCOA), which is an initiative of NCCI has been spearheading increased efforts to implement workplace programmes. These programmes have been put in place so that working adult Namibians have access to knowledge and resources on HIV/AIDS. I would like to encourage our employers not to give up, and to intensify their workplace programmes so that we can make a significant dent into HIV infections in our population.

While prevention is the backbone of our intervention strategy, other types of intervention are not ignored. Let us continue prioritising counselling and testing which is very critical to management of the pandemic.

Within the context of the very successful recent 1<sup>st</sup> National Testing Day, the Caprivi region is a case in point. Based on analysis of pregnant women at antenatal clinics, the HIV prevalence rate for Caprivi stood at 39% in 2006. By contrast, the recent data from the National Testing Day reveals that out of the 2196 individuals tested, 1741 tested HIV-negative, and 448 tested HIV-positive. This reflects a HIV prevalence rate of 20.4%. This type of random sampling is more representative than the previous system, as it takes into account all age groups and includes women and men.

As a first step, testing is the beginning of an intervention, with the aim to prolong the lives of infected compatriots by providing relevant treatment and counselling. We have seen a significant contribution by Home Based Care intervention to our efforts towards prolonging lives and facilitating positive living.

**Programme Director,**

The national response to HIV/AIDS also includes treatment, specifically Anti-retroviral Treatment. Over 50,000 people are on this treatment in the public sector with another 6,000-9,000 receiving similar treatment in the private sector.

The Government has committed increased funding under the budget for the current Financial Year to expand ARV treatment. However, the success of this programme entirely depends on knowing one's HIV status, and whether one meets with the criteria for enrolment in the programme.

Despite some humble achievements recorded in the combat against the pandemic, more needs to be done in terms of enhancing our intervention strategies and programmes as well as the possible introduction of additional programmes in the areas of prevention, testing, counselling and treatment. Thus, this novel will be a useful tool in our endeavours to enhance our prevention efforts.

I would like to recommend that this novel be introduced in our schools and youth groups as well as at workplaces with a view to deepen our understanding of HIV/AIDS and our individual and collective role in defeating the scourge. Dr Nyati's inspirational book will undoubtedly be the locally produced HIV/AIDS and language handbook of choice amongst the schools and youth alike. I found it to be stimulating and thought provoking and recommend it highly for bed time reading or reference material to all interested in the subject.

I challenge our youth and all compatriots to read this novel and critically analyse the message therein. It can only add value to our efforts if we know what it teaches us.

**Programme Director, Ladies and gentlemen,**

I now have the singular honour and distinct pleasure to declare the novel titled “The Other Presence” officially launched.

**I thank you!**