



Ministry of Health and Social Services, Namibia

Keynote Address

By

The Honorable Minister of Health and Social Services

DR RICHARD NCHABI KAMWI, MP

At the

2008 World AIDS Day Commemoration

In Oshakati, Oshana Region

2nd December 2008

Your Excellency the Governor of Oshana Region, Mr/Ms...

Your Excellencies the Regional Counsellors;

Your Excellencies, Church Leaders

The Business Community;

All Protocols observed,

Director of Ceremony,

I feel greatly honoured to join you this morning as you mark this year's World AIDS Day in this beautiful city of Oshakati. And I wish to seize this opportunity to thank our Governor, Honourable Clemens Kashiupulwa, our Councillors and the people of Oshana region for putting up such a momentous event as this. The presence here this morning of the great people of Oshana in this large number gives me courage and renews in me once more, the conviction that Namibia will conquer AIDS. I thank you all immensely.

This year's World AIDS Day marks the 20th commemoration of the Day since it was first launched by the World Health Organization in 1988.

In the last 20 years, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has proved to be one of the most challenging scourges ever faced by man. Between that time and now, the world has passed through many phases of the epidemic. We have come from a time of helplessness and denial due to ignorance and poor knowledge of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We have passed through a period of hopelessness, a period when medicine for treatment of AIDS seemed impossible and the world had thought and believed that being HIV-positive meant a death sentence. We have

even passed through a period when the mere thought of reversing the growing trend of HIV prevalence was considered an unachievable fit.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, as we commemorate the 20th World AIDS Day, we come with this history behind us and we look forward to a future of hope that we will overcome the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our country and the world as a whole. There have been commendable achievements in the fight against HIV/AIDS. We now know that prevention works, as prevention continues to yield fruits in many places. Increased availability and access to highly active anti-retroviral medicines has changed our thinking from that of hopelessness to living a life full of strength and vigour even when infected with HIV.

In 1992, Namibia started conducting the sentinel surveillance surveys every two years to determine the trend of HIV prevalence in the country. The 1992 surveillance survey was conducted in 8 sites at the time. Since then and with the support of our regions, we have steadily increased the number of the surveillance sites. By this year when we were conducting the 9th study, all the health districts in the country were included in order to improve the representativeness of the national data.

Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The result this year shows that we are making progress in our march towards conquering the HIV/AIDS epidemic. From a prevalence of 4.2% in 1992, the prevalence rose to 22% in

2002 – a five fold increase in ten years! A first slight decline to 19.7% was observed in 2004 and the epidemic seemed to have stabilized by 2006, when we recorded a prevalence rate of 19.9%. Today and from the report of the 2008 surveillance survey, Namibia stands at 17.8%. This year's result as encouraging as it seems, we are yet unable to celebrate. Our 17.8% prevalence figure still remains extremely high and unacceptable. What more when we consider the prevalence among the different age groups. While we are achieving a reduction in the younger age group of 15-24 years old, it is not the same among the older ones. From the current report, HIV prevalence has increased from 24% in 2006 to 26% in 2008 in the 35 to 39 year age group and from 17% in 2006 to 18% in 2008 in the 40 to 44 years age group. More worrisome is the fact that a higher increase has been observed in the 45 to 49 years age group which has increased from 9% in 2006 to 14% in 2008.

This scenario gives us serious concern. We are concerned that while we seem to be making progress on one end, we may be losing ground on another end. The regional disparity in the national prevalence is also another food for thought. Since 1992, the HIV prevalence rate for Katima Mulilo has been highest for all years, except in 1998 when Oshakati in the Oshana region experienced the highest rate of 34%.

Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen and the Good People of Oshana,

Oshakati has participated in the national sentinel surveillance survey since its inception and from a prevalence of 4% in 1992, there was a steady rise to 14% in 1994, 22% in 1996 and 34 % in 1998, the highest in the country then. What it means is that the epidemic grew more than 8 times in only six years. From 2000, we started seeing some signs of hope, with a slight

decline to 28% in 2000, and to the 22% of this year. However, although there is a sharp decline of 12 percentage points in ten years, the current figure of 22% prevalence places Oshana as one of the four regions with the highest prevalence in the country.

There is a clear need for a better understanding of the reasons behind the high prevalence in Oshana. We need to do more to understand the factors that are driving the epidemic in Oshana. This will enable us all to plan and implement evidence based interventions that will match the scope of the epidemic here.

Although we need to search a little further for reasons behind the high prevalence in Oshana, existing data, especially the Namibia Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) of 2006 already identifies some of the factors that are driving the epidemic in the region. Although there is a high level of knowledge about HIV/AIDS in the region, the level is lower among men than in women. A few examples will suffice here:

- Seventy-nine per cent (79%) of women have comprehensive knowledge about AIDS compared to 45% of men.
- While women score over 80% on knowledge of prevention of mother to child transmission, only 54% of men have the same knowledge.
- Looking at accepting attitude towards people living with HIV/AIDS, only 30% of men and 59% of women accept that they will care for a person living with HIV/AIDS, buy vegetables from them, allow infected female teachers to continue to teach if not sick and would not want to keep secret the HIV status of a family member.
- On uptake of HIV testing and counselling, 52% of women have ever been tested compared to 33% of men.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These indices tell us that we have very low involvement of our men in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It reinforces our knowledge about the reluctance of our men to accompany their spouses to ante-natal care. It may also be related to the high levels of gender-based violence in our country. The low score in comprehensive knowledge about HIV/AIDS explains the huge stigma that still exists in our communities. This stigma in turn helps to drive people living with HIV/AIDS underground, making it impossible for them to access AIDS treatment and support, even when the services are free of charge and readily available.

Distinguished Guests, Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite all the landmark achievements we have made in our fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the time is not there yet to take a rest. We are still faced with a myriad of challenges on our road to conquering AIDS. The fight from now requires us to be more dogged than we have been before. It requires us to be more strategic as we come to the end of our third Medium Term Plan and build up into the development of the fourth Medium Term Plan. Let us use the lessons learnt from the implementation of the previous plan to develop a stronger and more efficient plan for another five years.

From this venue and I say to you, from this assembly, let us today with one accord, stand up against all that have been militating against our collective effort to stamp out HIV/AIDS from the Namibia society.

Let us stand up against stigma and discrimination in Oshana;

Let us declare zero tolerance for new HIV infections among our youth in Oshana;

Let the men stand up today to be counted among the front liners in the fight against AIDS in Oshana;

Let us all stand up and get tested in Oshana;

Let us commit ourselves to a region free from HIV/AIDS;

I thank you for your kind attention.