

BUSINESS DAY, Monday, November 5 2001

Mbeki misinformed on AIDS drugs, says expert

Simon Barber

Washington Correspondent

US GUIDELINES for treating HIV/AIDS do not support President Thabo Mbeki's decision to deny antiretroviral drugs to SA patients in the public health system, the co-chairman of the committee which drew up the guidelines for the US health department has said.

Dr John Bartlett — who with Dr Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health heads the panel of experts responsible for the recommendations Mbeki has cited in defence of government's stance on antiretroviral drugs — wrote: "I expect that this decision reflects either misinformation or a bias that has no scientific foundation".

Bartlett, head of the infectious disease division of Johns Hopkins university medical school in Baltimore, was responding by e-mail to a request for comment on Mbeki's defence of his AIDS policy in Parliament last month.

A spokesman for Fauci referred Business Day to Bartlett for reaction to Mbeki's use of the guidelines. Mbeki said government's denial of antiretrovirals to patients who cannot obtain them privately was supported by the guidelines, specifically "where they have said these drugs

are as dangerous to health as the things they are supposed to treat".

The US health department "strongly advocates antiretroviral drugs for patients who qualify by the criteria that are stated in the guidelines," Bartlett wrote.

Qualifying candidates are identified in the guidelines as "all patients with acute HIV syndrome, those within six months of HIV seroconversion, and all patients with symptoms ascribed to HIV infection." Asymptomatic patients should also receive antiretrovirals if their immune cell counts fall below a certain level, the guidelines state.

"This has been a miracle form of therapy that has resulted in a 60% to 80% reduction in AIDS-related deaths, hospitalisations, and other complications related to HIV," Bartlett wrote. "These drugs, like all drugs, have side effects that need to be dealt with. The good outweighs the bad and it's not close. I don't know of any respected physician who would deter the use of these drugs in patients with AIDS because of side effects."

Bartlett said that while he would not feel comfortable speaking for the entire panel without its specific approval, "it would be very safe to say that the panel strongly believes in the benefits of antiretroviral therapy".

SOWETAN Monday November 5 2001

ANC pushes for speedy merger

By Khangale Makhado
Political Correspondent

WORKING groups aiming to foster a working relationship between the African National Congress (ANC) and the New National Party (NNP) should meet urgently to expedite the envisaged cooperation between the two parties.

The decision was taken at the weekend by an ANC special national executive committee meeting called to interrogate the envisaged "marriage" between the two parties. The meeting also looked at the niling ANC-Cosatu-SACP tripartite alliance.

The new political developments come at a time when the NNP and its main ally the Democratic Party – which formed the Democratic Alliance – have split.

ANC spokesman Smuts Ngonyama said the relationship, which is to exist on the basis of cooperation at all levels of government, would however not impact on the organisations' identity, autonomy and the articulation of policies and programmes. He said that they needed to understand that the two organisations came from different backgrounds.

Ngonyama said that the NNP had undergone a long evolutionary process but

remains an important political force intent on transcending its past and contributing positively to the country's future.

"The relationship should include among its strategic objectives the building of a true South African patriotism as part of the effort to 'deracialise' our society and develop a unity of purpose to confront the great challenges of our country," Ngonyama said.

The NNP yesterday welcomed the ANC's announcement, saying it had all the potential to start a new era in South African politics. However, if the weekend's events are anything to go by, the ANC may have to wait longer while the NNP tries to sort itself out following widespread defiance by members who want to remain part of the DA.

In Mpumalanga at the weekend more than 70 of the province's councillors are reported to have unanimously put their weight behind the DA. This follows similar support for NNP Western Cape leader Gerald Morkel against joining forces with the ruling party.

The NNP yesterday said that a Worcester meeting where support for the DP was expressed was "aimed at undermining the NNP federal council's decision and destabilising the party".

SOWETAN Monday November 5, 2001

HIV-Aids funding to rise

By Charity Bhengu

FUNDING for HIV-Aids programmes will increase in the next three years and most will go directly to provinces to strengthen areas most affected by the disease, Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang said yesterday.

The minister was addressing health workers and representatives of various religious communities at Standard Bank Arena in Johannesburg yesterday during a ceremony to celebrate the day for healthcare providers.

"The hospital and clinic managers at service level know where the pressure is greatest and they will decide whether to spend this on drug supplies, laboratory services or recruitment of nursing staff or doctors," she said. "I must reassure you that the allocation of this money will in some way ease the burden that HIV-Aids is adding on your daily work activities."

The minister added that the Government is taking measures to ensure improved quality of care, especially for those infected with and affected by HIV-Aids.

The Gauteng department of health had set aside R70 million for HIV-Aids from its 2001-2001 budget, but is looking at increasing this figure. Most of the money was used on HIV-Aids awareness campaigns.