

**THE *WORKING FOR WATER* PROGRAMME TAKES A STAND AGAINST
HIV/AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

WORLD AIDS DAY, 1 DECEMBER 2000

Working for Water management is serious about HIV/AIDS, and to prove this, will be handing out 15 000 HIV/AIDS kits to people in communities throughout the country”, says Jacqui Boule, the programme’s General Manager of a programme which clears invading alien plants throughout the country. “Each card contains a red ribbon pin which workers are being asked to wear, condoms, and a statement of commitment by programme management, with some key tips on how to avoid infection, as well as the AIDS toll free line number for advice”, she explains.

Working for Water has committed more than R1 million to AIDS education and training. The programme has adopted an interventionist stance in the fight against the disease, and makes every effort to work in partnership with community-based government and non-government organisations to build capacity at the lowest level.

Of the issues raised by employees, many want to know how to avoid infection; whether they will be treated fairly should they be HIV positive; whether they will be treated with confidentiality; how safe it is to work in the field where injury and blood contact is an inevitability, and whether they will miss out on employee, promotional and training benefits.

The WfW prevention programme incorporates awareness, education programmes, condom distribution, and STD management. The objective is to target the poorest of the poor with skills development training, nutrition education and life-skills development.

“HIV/AIDS knows no social, gender or racial boundaries. The disease thrives in an environment of poverty, rapid urbanisation and destabilisation. In such circumstances, women have very little control over their lives, and are especially vulnerable to infection”. So says Simone Noemdoe, Social Development Co-ordinator for the *Working for Water*, an invasive alien plant clearing programme with 300 projects throughout the country.

“We are painfully aware of the fact that condom distribution programmes will fail if not accompanied by raising awareness and education to change attitudes towards sexual practice. If we do not develop skills and confidence in people, and create an enabling environment, they will not protect themselves”, says Simone.

In the past decade, 12 million people in sub-Saharan Africa died of the disease. Each day in Africa, this disease, of Dickensian proportions, claims another 5 500

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men, women and children. One in seven new infections on the African continent in 1999 were believed to be in South Africa.

In Mpumalanga, more than 150 new infections occur every day. South Africa has more HIV positive people than any country in the world (4 million).

“These facts and figures become even more frightening when one considers that of the millions, who are *infected*, there are many more that are *affected* (families, communities, people in the workplace)”, says Simone, “The socio-economic ramifications of this are enormous”. When the breadwinner in the house dies, the only source of income is lost (school fees, clothes etc), often leaving single mothers and orphans to fend for themselves. This is happening on a daily basis in many of rural communities.

“The *Working for Water* programme is under no illusions. Given the global statistics on infection, it is highly likely that of the 10 000 workers and contractors currently connected the programme, a great number of them will be infected. The ripple effect on productivity, household income and family life cannot be overlooked”, says Ms Boule.

The programme is committed to the integration of HIV/AIDS into the everyday activities of the programme. A peer education approach has been adopted, where individuals are selected for their capacity to encourage HIV positive persons to participate in the programme, as well as a willingness to interact and work with HIV positive and negative persons regarding the issues of HIV/AIDS.

Creative, non-threatening approaches to AIDS awareness are adopted by the WfW, with drama, song, poetry competitions and exhibitions. Such activities take place on World Aids Day as well as at times throughout the year.

“Given the magnitude of the epidemic, it will not be long before it has to form part of a daily routine within the programme and in the communities within and around which we work”, says Simone.

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