

Spectre of HIV/Aids stalks halls of parliament

BY CHRISTELLE TERREBLANCHE
AND WENDY JASSON-DA COSTA

"Accept that Aids is here," a 22-year old HIV-positive Khayelitsha woman told parliament's ANC caucus this week.

Two hours later, the ruling party's MPs heard the family of one of their own, at his memorial service, plead that people with HIV/Aids not be left to suffer alone.

It was the day on which the reality of the devastation that the HI virus has wreaked on South Africa was brought home to the country's highest democratic institution, which has been accused of not taking the pandemic seriously enough.

HIV has infected more than 5 million South Africans.

Vytjie Mentor, the ANC caucus chairperson, said the events of the day were "compelling" and experiencing them was "a step in the right direction".

"But we are not even encouraging each other to be tested for HIV," she told her fellow MPs. "I want to have a day on which all we talk to each other about HIV/Aids and then all go and get tested."

Mentor said MPs would not be required to disclose their HIV status. She said she merely wanted them "to do the right thing".

She said she would continue to press for all MPs to undergo HIV testing when they returned from the East-er recess.

Themi Ngubane, the young woman who spoke to the ANC caucus about HIV/Aids for 45 minutes, is accustomed to lecturing politicians about the disease. Last year she spoke about her HIV/Aids experiences to members and staff of the United States congress and to former president Bill Clinton.



Themi Ngubane shared the nightmare of Aids - and the dreams of HIV-infected people - with ANC MPs this week

Ngubane told the South African MPs of her thoughts when she was informed that she had contracted HIV. She said she veered from denial to anger at being stigmatised and rejected. She told them of the severe illness she endured, of the experience of taking anti-retroviral drugs and of her eventual recovery.

Last month she toured South Africa, making presentations on HIV/Aids at schools and clinics. A documentary featuring her was broadcast recently on SABC radio stations.

"I would like to make people think and speak their minds about HIV/Aids and see the positive side of it," she said.

In parliament, the reality is sinking in. On notice-boards along its corridors, hardly a month goes by without announcements of funeral services for staff members who have succumbed to Aids when they should

have been in the prime of life. Parliament is trying to set up a counselling service for members and staff affected by HIV/Aids and it is understood that the ANC is launching an investigation into how the disease is affecting its structures. But no one is willing to confirm this on the record.

Only Ruth Bhengu, a former ANC MP, has spoken out in parliament about the death of a family member from Aids. She lost her daughter to the disease. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Inkatha Freedom Party leader, publicly admitted to losing two children to Aids.

Many MPs have been grappling for years with the institutional silence on Aids, the government's lacklustre, slow-motion distribution of anti-retrovirals and the Aids denialism of some in their ranks.

On the same day that Ngubane spoke to the caucus, MPs and minis-

ters paid tribute to Dr Ian Phillips. He had been an academic, an MP and an Umkhonto we Sizwe operative. He died on Monday from complications related to HIV. Jeff Radebe, the transport minister, revealed what had killed his special adviser, a step saluted by MPs.

Phillips's sister, Moyra Meyer, said at the memorial service: "Today a voice calls out to all who have locked themselves in silence regarding their HIV status, whether it's through fear, through shame or through misunderstanding."

Mentor said: "This problem has reached all institutions. It is a reality in schools, in churches and businesses. But the question is whether institutions are opening their eyes or continuing to turn a blind eye."

"Institutions across society are bleeding... we must ask whether we are still going to bury each other silently."

MPs said there was growing awareness of the realities of the disease and more discussion about its effects.

"The reality of Aids is becoming part of the culture of parliament," one said.

But the chairperson of parliament's health committee, James Ngculu, said this week's events should not be read as representing a significant shift in attitudes.

"It is a commitment we [the ANC] have always had, but which has been misconstrued," he said. "There is no shift. It is just that the message is coming out clearer."

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, the minister of public services and administration, and a member of the beefed-up South African National Aids Council, said: "We are seeing an attempt to bring together stakeholders [for] greater synergy on how we move forward [on HIV/Aids]."