

Barbara Hogan paves a new path in SA



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In an interview with the BBC, Ivan Lewis, the UK's International Development Minister said that the UK Government had announced the programme 'to back the political courage of Barbara Hogan in tackling HIV/Aids'.

"Hogan has set a bold and exciting vision, and that is why the UK is fully committed to working with her," said Lewis, who is in South Africa for World Aids Day, as a demonstration of solidarity with Hogan in the struggle against HIV/Aids. On World Aids Day, the British Government announced a donation of £15m (R231m) for the South African government's anti-HIV programme, in a vote of confidence for South Africa's Minister of Health Barbara Hogan.



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In August, the newly elected South African President Kgalema Motlanthe announced his interim cabinet. In a move that was widely welcomed and celebrated, Motlanthe replaced Manto Tshabalala-Msimang with Hogan as Minister of Health.

Hogan was known as the most publically vocal ANC member to criticise the government's HIV/Aids policies, and her appointment represented a clear break from such policies.

Since Hogan became the Minister of Health, there has been a marked change in the approach of both local and international HIV/Aids activists and donors when dealing with the Ministry of Health. Hogan has sworn to turn the health services in South Africa around by placing her focus on the challenges of HIV, Aids and TB.

In a speech at the HIV Vaccine Research Conference in October, Hogan made clear what her new mandate would be: "It was imperative to get ahead of the curve of this epidemic ten years ago. We all, for various reasons, have lost ground. It's even more imperative now that we make HIV prevention work...We know that HIV causes Aids. The science of HIV and Aids is one of the most researched subjects in the medical field."

A recent study, released by Harvard researchers, estimates that over 365,000 South African HIV/Aids patients could have been saved from premature death, if they had been provided the proper antiretroviral treatments.

Positive signs

According to Stats SA, the rate of HIV/Aids infections (the percentage of the population currently infected with HIV) within South Africa has dropped from its highest levels of 15,2% in 2004 to 11,0% in 2008. In another study released last Thursday, Johns Hopkins University and the Centre for Aids Development Research and Evaluation provided evidence that HIV prevention campaigns had saved more than 700,000 South African people from becoming infected. The study also showed that 64.2 percent of sexually active South Africans (16.7m people) were adhering to some form of HIV prevention behaviour. Despite the fact that these are encouraging numbers South Africa still has one of the most severe HIV/Aids epidemics in the world, with an estimated 800 people a day dying from Aids-related diseases.

Looking forward

South Africa now has a feasible chance to rectify over a decade of poor HIV/Aids health management. This prospect does not originate solely from the actions of Minister Hogan, but rather from the doors she is opening by reversing a decade-long perception of South Africa as a misled nation on the accepted truths of HIV/Aids.

The £15m donation from the UK is a sign of changing times, of a new HIV/Aids approach within South Africa that is marshalling local and international support and acclaim.

As part of the World Aids Day campaign, Barbara Hogan, Deputy President Baleka Mbete and KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sibusiso Ndebele addressed a gathering of people in Durban to promote a new campaign of "stop HIV and AIDS: lead and unite".

This is what Hogan has already managed to do in the fight against HIV/Aids, to lead and to unite.

Where the UK funds will be spent

- * More protection for mothers and babies: Better availability of free tests for mothers during pregnancy, and anti-HIV drugs for pregnant mothers and children.
- * National HIV awareness campaign: Information on safe-sex and HIV health issues will be sent out via

radio, newspaper, text messages and street posters.

- * Better nurses, doctors and clinics: Medical staff and managers helped to improve the quality of advice and service to patients, and staff morale improved through stronger incentives for quality care.
- * HIV and Aids watchdog: National Aids Council strengthened and given a clearer remit to hold all parts of government to account.