

The Lazarus Effect in Lesotho: *New phase in the fight against HIV and AIDS*

By Karen Kartes

Summary:

The Mpeisa family in Lesotho represent three generations living with HIV/AIDS – Maneo, 54 (mother), Mpolai, 28 (daughter), and Tseliso, 2 (granddaughter).

All came close to death but received help and are communicating a message of hope – that you can now survive and thrive even if HIV+ in Africa. Maneo and Mpolai volunteer at the local clinic because they are dedicated to urging community members to get tested.



"Stigma-Busters": Maneo, Mpolai, & Tseliso

Maneo Mpeisa, 52, lost her husband in 1998. He had been working in South African mines when he fell ill and passed away. After the death of her husband, Mpeisa was regularly ill for five years. "I did not know my HIV status until the Sekameng support group encouraged me to test in May," she says. "I was tested and found HIV-positive."

"World Vision and Sekameng support group helped me throughout my illness and I have never lost hope," says Mpeisa. "I was enrolled to the free government antiretroviral treatment while World Vision assisted me with food aid rations and the support groups offered me care and support."

Mpeisa is not the only one in her home who is HIV-positive. Her daughter Mpolai Mpeisa, 28, is also HIV-positive. "I found out about my HIV status in August when my child, 18-month-old Tseliso Mpeisa was ill. "The nurses encouraged me to test in order to know my status, so they could help my child," she says. "My baby and I were enrolled to take antiretrovirals."

"It has been two months since we started the treatment and our lives have improved," she says. "I am fine; my baby is still ill, but she is better than before."

Mpeisa says the big challenge her family faces is hunger: "We have to have a balanced diet so the medication can work effectively but we are unemployed and ill. Food to us is a problem."

The Mpeisa family are three generations infected by HIV: mother, daughter and granddaughter. This is the reality of HIV devastation in sub Saharan Africa. According to UNAIDS, 31 per cent of the adult population in Lesotho are HIV-positive.

Another person from Sekameng Area Development Programme (ADP) who is HIV-positive is Tina Tsising, 28. She lives in a family of eight people but she is the only one who has been tested. "I was suffering from Tuberculosis and herpes and when my blood was tested I was told I am HIV-positive. I am now enrolled in free antiretroviral treatment and my health has improved," she says.

Tsising says she was 28 kilograms when she was sick but now she is 49 kilograms. "I am now healthy and alive. I thought I would die," she says with a smile. "Thanks to World Vision for providing us with food aid to help us improve our health."

The Sekameng ADP Executive Committee Member Mateboho Shale says that before the government provided free treatment for HIV and AIDS, most patients could not afford treatment and therefore died with AIDS-related diseases: "In our village alone, we used to have at least three funerals a week due to AIDS-related illnesses but since the provision of free antiretroviral treatment, the support group has encouraged people to test in order to have access to treatment."

Shale says the rate of death has now gone down, shown by the cemetery yard in her village. "You can see we have no more new graves, now we can stay up to a month without a funeral because of the access to AIDS treatment."

Despite access to antiretroviral treatment there are still challenges such as a shortage of food and maintaining a balanced diet. Another challenge is that despite free treatment, some patients do not access it because they don't want their blood tested. Since testing is voluntary, some patients die of AIDS without treatment simply because they don't want to know their status.

Meanwhile, life expectancy in Lesotho has continued to drop significantly because of the high rate of HIV and AIDS. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), since the emergence of the disease in the 1980s, life expectancy has dropped from 52 years to 39 years.

There is still more work to be done to educate the community on the importance of testing. World Vision Lesotho, in collaboration with support groups, has embarked on a campaign to sensitize people on the importance of voluntary counseling and testing to ensure people get help.

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