

Health

Pandemic disrupts supply

SA's poor scramble for HIV drugs amid virus

JOHANNESBURG, Aug 12, (AP) — When her regular clinic ran out of her government-funded HIV medications amid South Africa's COVID-19 lockdown, Sibongile Zulu panicked. A local pharmacy had the drugs for \$48, but she didn't have the money after being laid off from her office job in the shutdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Desperate for the lifesaving medication, the single mother of four called a friend — a nurse with a local charity helping people with HIV, the Sister Mura Foundation. She's one of the lucky ones: Since April, the foundation has provided Zulu with the drugs, purchased locally.

Across South Africa and around the world, the pandemic has disrupted the supply of antiretroviral drugs, endangering the lives of many of the more than 24 million people globally who take the medications that suppress the HIV virus.

In sub-Saharan Africa alone, a study by UNAIDS found that a six-month disruption of antiretroviral therapy could lead to 500,000 additional AIDS-related deaths.

The disruptions are particularly troubling in South Africa, which has 7.7 million HIV-positive people, the world's largest number, with 62% of those depending on the government's antiretroviral program, also the world's largest. Anti-coronavirus restrictions have hindered both imports of the drugs and the local production and distribution of the medications, according to a report by UNAIDS.

In addition, many HIV patients have stopped going to the often-crowded clinics for fear of being exposed to the coronavirus. And others cannot afford the transport fares to reach clinics.

In June, UNAIDS Executive Director **Winnie Byanyima** said countries should "urgently make plans now to mitigate the impacts of higher costs and reduced availability of antiretroviral medicines."

"I call on countries and buyers of HIV medicines to act swiftly in order to ensure that everyone who is currently on treatment continues to be on it, saving lives and stopping new HIV infections," Byanyima said.



Byanyima

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Mortality

HIV positive people who contract COVID-19, are more than twice as likely to die from the disease as people without HIV, according to an early study of mortality rates in South Africa's Western Cape province, the country's first epicenter for the disease.

"We're worried that we're going to be seeing an increase in deaths in co-infections such as TB and other opportunistic infections," Dr. Nomathamba Chandiwana, an HIV research clinician, told The Associated Press.

Clinics in central Johannesburg have seen a 10% to 25% drop in people coming for HIV treatment, she said. On top of that, several clinics have had to close temporarily when nurses and doctors have become sick with COVID-19.

"Some clinics see 60 to 80 patients per day, so when one closes, for even a week, it means many people are not getting their drugs. It's a serious threat," said Chandiwana, who works for Ezintsha, part of the University of the Witwatersrand.

COVID-19 is similarly disrupting vaccinations. The past few months have seen a 25% reduction in childhood immunizations, according to Shabir Madhi, a professor of vaccinology at the same university, who warned of possible outbreaks of measles.

The diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis also has been hampered by the pandemic, risking the lives of many of South Africa's neediest citizens, health experts say.

"Disruptions to these medications is a public health problem. It threatens the poor and most vulnerable," said Vinyarak Bhardwaj, deputy director of Doctors Without Borders' program in South Africa, which has HIV programs in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces.

"We're responding to this threat by helping to minimize shortages and by providing stable HIV patients with multi-month prescriptions to limit their visits to the clinics. We're also increasing treatment advice by telephone and the internet," he said.

Reliable supplies of antiretroviral drugs are so critically important in South Africa that a monitoring program, Stop Stock-outs, was created in 2013 and is closely tracking and responding to the disruptions amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mill town of Ngodwana in the country's northeast, a truck stop on the highway to Mozambique, is a microcosm of South Africa's inequality, rated as the world's highest.

Ngodwana's 3,500 residents are mostly Black, living in a densely packed shantytown, with limited electricity and running water. Safe distancing is nearly impossible. Years ago, the truck traffic was blamed for bringing HIV to the area; now come fears it will become a hot spot for COVID-19.

Many in Ngodwana can no longer afford to travel the 40 kilometers (25 miles) to the town of Nelspruit to get their drugs and don't feel comfortable going to the crowded local clinic. So the Dutch-based aid group North Star Alliance set up a tented drop-in center and started home visits.

Treatment

Clad in a mask, gloves and protective surgical gown, nurse Nomatunda Siduna walked through Ngodwana's dirt streets to a mud-walled, tin-roofed home. Once inside, she quickly got to work, distributing a two-month supply of antiretroviral drugs to the HIV-positive woman, a sex-worker, and advising her how to stay as safe as possible amid the pandemic.

"You must know that with COVID out there, you must take your treatment, every day, same time, like you're always doing," Siduna told her. "And you must use a condom when you're sleeping with anyone."

Pretty Mkhabela, 34, said the pandemic frightens her and that she's taking new precautions as a sex worker.

"Yes, I'm scared," Mkhabela said. "When I work with my client, I use a mask and my client also uses a mask."

Another resident, Rose Khondowa, tried to get her antiretroviral drugs by traveling to Nelspruit, but encountered only a locked gate after a COVID-19 outbreak among hospital workers caused the clinic to temporarily close. She didn't have enough money, about \$4, for a second trip.

By chance, she saw the North Star Alliance gazebo in Ngodwana and succeeded in getting a month's supply of antiretroviral drugs.

"If I didn't find them," she said, "I would have died."

Also:

NASHUA, N.H.: The city of Nashua, New Hampshire, and Harbor Homes, Inc. are getting more than \$1.9 million in federal funds to help 45 low-income people living with HIV and AIDS and their families.

The funding is being offered through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS Program. It's part of more than \$35.8 million being awarded nationally.

Harbor Homes, Inc., which is receiving over \$494,000 over three years, will continue providing housing assistance to persons living with HIV and AIDS in **Hillsborough County**, and in **Derry, Windham, and Londonderry in Rockingham County**. The program includes a collaborative partnership with the Southern New Hampshire HIV/AIDS Task Force to provide program participants with housing case management, counseling support, and auxiliary services to sustain housing stability. The program will serve three households annually with short-term, mortgage, rent and utility assistance and 11 households annually with tenant-based rental assistance.

Nashua, which is getting more than \$1.4 million, will continue providing tenant-based rental assistance and supportive services for up to 31 chronically homeless households living with HIV and AIDS within Hillsborough County.



In this handout photo taken on Aug 6, and provided by Russian Direct Investment Fund, an employee shows a new vaccine at the Nikolai Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow, Russia. (AP)

Coronavirus

Russia's injection raises doubts on safety, effectiveness

Science, politics linked in vaccine race

WASHINGTON, Aug 12, (Agencies) — No, Russia is not having a Sputnik moment.

The announcement Tuesday by Russian President Vladimir Putin that his country was the first to approve a coronavirus vaccine did not provoke the awe and wonder of the Soviet Union's launch of the first satellite into orbit in 1957. Instead it was met by doubts about the science and safety.

But it also underscored how, like the space race, the competition to have the first vaccine is about international rivalries as well as science. The first nation to develop a way to defeat the novel coronavirus will achieve a kind of moonshot victory and the global status that goes along with it.

That's valuable to Putin, whose popularity at home has declined amid a stagnant economy and the ravages of the virus outbreak.

"To be the first one out of the block with a coronavirus vaccine would be a real — pardon the pun — shot in the arm for the Kremlin," said Timothy Frye, a political science professor at Columbia University who specializes in post-Soviet politics.

Certainly, Russia is not alone in viewing a vaccine in this light. China, where the virus first emerged, has also raced to make progress on a vaccine. A state-owned Chinese company is boasting that its employees, including top executives, received experimental shots even before the government approved testing in people.

And President Donald Trump, whose handling of the coronavirus pandemic has put his political fate in grave jeopardy, is hoping to get credit for his administration's aggressive push for a vaccine, ideally one that arrives before Election Day in November.

It's far from clear at this point whether Putin has beaten Trump to this medical milestone.

Putin said the Health Ministry gave its approval after the vaccine underwent the necessary tests and said one of his two adult daughters had been inoculated. "We should be grateful to those who have taken this first step, which is very important for our country and the whole world," he said.

No proof was offered and scientists

in Russia warned that more testing would be necessary to prove it is safe and effective. Nonetheless, officials said vaccination of doctors could start as early as this month and mass vaccination may begin as early as October.

Scientists around the world have been cautioning that even if vaccine candidates are proven to work, it will take even more time to tell how long the protection will last.

"It's a too early stage to truly assess whether it's going to be effective, whether it's going to work or not," Dr Michael Head, senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton.

It was also too soon to dismiss the Russian claim out of hand.

The country, though economically dependent on the export of natural resources, does have a history of achievement in science, medicine and aerospace — including becoming the first to put a person into space, in 1961.

Advanced

"It is possible that they concentrated and could do this," said Daniel Fried, a retired senior US diplomat. "I'm not scoffing at it, but it doesn't mean that the Russian economy is advanced."

A vaccine would be the kind of significant achievement that would elevate Putin at home and in the international community.

"They would love to be able to claim credit because the first country to develop the vaccine will gain enormous prestige," said Fried, a former assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs who is now a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council.

It's also possible Russia had help. The US, Britain and Canada last month accused hackers working for Russian intelligence of trying to steal information about a coronavirus vaccine from academic and pharmaceutical research institutions.

In any case, the public is eager for a vaccine as global deaths from the virus surpass 730,000. Some say they would even welcome one from Russia, provided it passes muster with US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration.

"I can't take it anymore. I'm getting crazy," said Fernanda Henderson, as she strapped her infant into a car seat at a park in the Maryland suburbs of Washington for a break from quarantining at home. "I don't think the CDC or the FDA would approve something that is not going to work."

But to Vesna Jezic, a 79-year-old native of Croatia and immunologist who was taking her grandchildren to the same park, the suspiciously fast progress on the vaccine announced by Putin was reason to be doubtful. "You can imagine we don't trust anything that comes from Russia," she said.

The Russian president may face similar doubts at home. Frye noted a 2018 Gallup Poll that showed the former Soviet countries have some of the highest rates of anti-vaccination sentiment in the world.

"If it turns out not to work, it would be a real black eye," he said.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, said Tuesday that the Trump administration is keen on finding a "vaccine that is safe and effective for the American people and the people of the world."

In an interview with US Television (ABC) Azar said "the point is not to be first with the vaccine."

The remarks also came in response to earlier announcement made by Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying that Russia produced a vaccine against coronavirus, Covid-19.

Azar said that transparent data is needed, and that this data has to be from phase three trials that shows that a vaccine is safe and effective.

"That's what President Trump is leading with the historic Operation Warp Speed initiative, with six vaccines in development," Azar said.

He said they believe they are on track to having tens of millions of doses of FDA gold-standard vaccine by December, and hundreds of millions of doses going into 2021.

In the last two weeks, "we've seen — under President Trump's leadership, the most historic advances in the development of vaccines we've ever seen in human history."

"The United States now has six vaccines that we've placed major investments in.

increase recoveries to 79,342. It added 761 patients were still receiving treatment.

It said it has so far registered 4,181 cases in Hong Kong, 58 in Macau and 480 in Taiwan, and reporting 3,052 recoveries

in Hong Kong, 46 in Macau and 443 in Taiwan. (KUNA)

21 virus deaths in Victoria: The



Maria Alvarez, 24, holds her newborn baby girl, standing near the wooden box that contain the cremated remains of her husband who died from the new coronavirus in June, after arriving in the home of friend who has offered her a place to stay, in Lima, Peru on July 30, 2020. Maria, who had an asymptomatic case of COVID-19, gave birth to her first child the day before at the National Perinatal and Maternal Institute in a special ward for mothers with the virus. (AP)

Australian state of Victoria on Wednesday reported a record 21 virus deaths and 410 new cases from an outbreak in the city of Melbourne that has prompted a strict lockdown.

State Premier **Daniel Andrews** said 16 of the deaths were linked to aged-care facilities. The number of new cases in Victoria is down from the peak, giving authorities some hope the outbreak is waning.

Meanwhile, three Melbourne vloggers were fined after posting social media videos showing them breaching nighttime curfews for a McDonald's run, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported.

The five-minute video, since deleted, showed the students walking through alleys, dodging police officers and dancing inside the restaurant, ABC said. (AP)

722 virus cases in Japan: Japan reported 722 new cases of the coronavirus over the last 24 hours as of 4:00 pm (0700 GMT) on Wednesday, bringing the nation's total number to 50,800, the health ministry and local authorities said.

The country's death toll rose by seven to 1,060. Tokyo confirmed 222 new cases, topping 200 for the first time in three days, which brought the cumulative cases in the city of about 14 million people to 16,474.

The tallies exclude those who were linked to the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship in February. (KUNA)



Nurse Nomatunda Siduna poses for a portrait while holding a box with antiretroviral drugs in Ngodwana, South Africa on July 3, 2020. Across Africa and around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the supply of antiretroviral drugs to many of the more than 24 million people who take them, endangering their lives. (AP)



Vervoort



Andrews

Health

Masks mandatory in Brussels:

Authorities in Brussels are introducing mandatory mask rules across the Belgian capital following a spike in cases.

Brussels Minister-President **Rudi Vervoort's** office said Wednesday that the number of new infections in the city had reached Belgium's red line of 50 per 100,000 inhabitants on average over the last seven days.

A statement says the wearing of masks is from now on obligatory for all people aged 12 and over in all public places and in private places accessible to the public.

Brussels is home to the main European Union institutions and the NATO military alliance and has a population of around 1.2 million people. Mandatory masks are also in place in the port city of Antwerp.

Belgium has one of the highest COVID-19 mortality rates per capita in the world. Around 10,000 people have died in a country with a population of some 11.5 million. (AP)

Singapore clears dorms:

Singapore's government says most foreign workers can now resume work as their dormitories have been cleared of COVID-19 after months of lockdown and virus testing. People living in the crowded dormitories were the bulk of Singapore's 55,353 cases. Only 27 deaths have been recorded in the tiny island-state. The Ministry of Manpower said in a statement late Tuesday that all the dormitories have been cleared, except for 17 standalone blocks which serve as quarantine facilities. It said all foreign workers living in these dormitories have either recovered or tested as virus-free, except for 22,500 workers in isolation. It said the majority of them are now able to return to work including 81% of the total 387,000 workers in the construction, marine shipyard and process industries. (AP)

25 virus cases in China:

China said Wednesday 25 people tested positive for the coronavirus in the past 24 hours, 16 of them came from abroad, while there were no death cases registered.

Xinhua news agency, monitored in Kuwait, quoted the National Health Commission as saying total registered infections in mainland increased to 84,737 and deaths remained at 4,634.

The commission said 58 people have recovered from the virus since yesterday to