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Zimbabwe, disease

Zimbabwe: Dealing with the HIV/AIDS Epidemic

Zimbabwe is a country in Southern Africa with a moderate to warm climate and a population of 15.6 million (*Zimbabwe Facts and Culture*). Zimbabwe has dealt with many problems through the years, one of these being HIV/AIDS. Throughout the past 40 years, Zimbabwe has dealt with many difficulties. Specifically the HIV virus, a virus that weakens the immune system, decreases one's ability to fight disease, and cannot be cured (*What is HIV*). Many of the citizens of Zimbabwe have been affected by the deadly HIV epidemic whether someone has had a loved one infected with the disease or they themselves have it. Either way, HIV/AIDS is a sensitive topic in Zimbabwe. The first cases of AIDS were discovered in the 1980s and ever since, Zimbabwe has suffered from the disease, as it has become an epidemic (*Mugurungi*).

A typical family in Zimbabwe usually consists of two parents with two or more children (*Household Population and Housing Characteristics*). The term "family" in Zimbabwe means anyone in which a person has a close relationship with, and these relationships are very important to one's life. For example, a close friend would be considered family, and a cousin is not referred to as a "cousin" but as a brother or sister. Zimbabwe is also, for the most part, patriarchal. This is because, with the exception of certain minority groups, the oldest male is thought of and expected to be the leader in each household (*Evason*). Typical housing uses brick or mud for the walls with metal roofing (*Zimbabwe - Housing*). Over half of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas with only 32.24% of the population living in urban areas and cities (*Urbanization in Zimbabwe 2021*). Meat products paired with other ingredients make up the majority of one's diet in Zimbabwe. Meat is usually cooked on a grill and served with corn or rice (*exoticca*). Families have access to health care, however, it is not affordable. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused it to become difficult for families to earn a living as it is hard to find jobs or make enough money for one's family (*Mangundu*).

The COVID-19 pandemic hit families in Zimbabwe hard. Many jobs were lost and businesses suffered tremendously during the initial lockdown. Going along with that, the poverty numbers also increased greatly and many families are now struggling. At one point during the pandemic, it looked as though another lockdown would be essential, but Israel Murefu, president of the Employers' Confederation of Zimbabwe, had taken note and mentioned that another lockdown would be harmful towards Zimbabwe's economy (*Gilliard*). Since then, vaccines have been distributed throughout Zimbabwe with almost half the population vaccinated. As of August 2022, 31.8% of Zimbabwe had been fully vaccinated and 43.1% had received one of two doses (*Zimbabwe*).

Zimbabwe also struggles financially. This is primarily because of the country gaining its independence in 1980. Zimbabwe has had to put its trust in agricultural and mining industries, which isn't always the most dependable. Of the children living in rural areas, 76.3% of them are affected by poverty. In addition to this, half of the citizens of Zimbabwe live below the food poverty line. Poverty is a growing concern, much of it is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it affected many families by causing many people to lose jobs who couldn't work from home. Even though poverty is a big concern in this area, education is not. This is due to the fact that a large portion of the nation's budget is put toward education. Because of this, Zimbabwe is one of the top countries for the highest adult literacy rate in Africa (*Louis*). This proves as an advantage for Zimbabwe because the more education one might receive, the more job opportunities there are for that person.

Another issue Zimbabwe has been dealing with is clean water and plumbing. In the year 2008, there had been an outbreak of cholera, which is a virus that can be caused by drinking water that has been contaminated with the cholera bacteria. The disease can be fatal. The contaminated water infected 100,000 people with the virus and killed 4,200. The water sources are not always safe either, many being contaminated. Though there are ways in which this problem is being fixed, it is still expensive. Additionally, in the year 2019, a drought negatively affected 2 million individuals by restricting the availability of clean drinking water (*Zimbabwe: Dire Lack of Clean Water in Capitol*).

Infectious disease has been a problem in Zimbabwe for quite some time. One disease that is causing a heavy impact on the health of many Zimbabweans is HIV, with 12.9% of the population infected as of 2020 (*National HIV Survey*). Although the trends are getting better, HIV still continues to change the lives of many. There are numerous factors that contribute to the cause of the spreading of this disease. Lack of information on the topic, paid sexual activity, mother to baby, and multiple sexual partners are just a few examples of how HIV is spread so easily throughout Zimbabwe. Many people die at a young age from the disease as it turns into AIDS and starts destroying the immune system. Younger people are often infected, this is because a mother who has HIV or AIDS can spread it to her children during pregnancy, labor, and birth. Many people do not have access to the medication that helps slow down the effects of HIV, which increases the chance of a nearer death (*What is HIV*).

There are additional complications that come with the deadly HIV virus. These complications include a higher chance of developing certain cancers later in life. This can mean that while someone may not be in critical condition because of their HIV, a cancer that they get because of it could maybe cut their life short. Some other complications include tuberculosis, pneumonia, and toxoplasmosis, which is a deadly infection that can cause heart disease and even seizures. There are other complications as well that are just as dangerous. These added effects of HIV can make the life of an infected person harder than it would be with the effects that already come with HIV by itself (*What is HIV*).

There are multiple different options for the solution of this problem, however they each come with their own downside. The problem in many of these solutions is the cost. There is not a solution, however, that will completely get rid of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe, but there are quite a few that will bring awareness to the topic and slow the spread. One solution that would be helpful in raising awareness is education about the disease. Many people are not sure of how exactly HIV is spread, which can cause them to be unaware on the virus and how it affects them. With the knowledge available to the citizens of Zimbabwe, people may become more cautious and develop ways to lower their own chances of getting the virus. Learning about the topic might also help with the high numbers of paid sexual activity in Zimbabwe. This is a big factor in the spreading of HIV/AIDS and as more people become aware of what all this can affect, they may be more careful and even limit themselves to one sexual partner. Though this will not completely rid the country of this virus, it will provide Zimbabweans with the information about the virus they need to help them make smart decisions in their life.

While there are some people who will still partake in some of these risky behaviors, these courses could also teach ways how the virus could be prevented. Although the best way to stay safe from HIV/AIDS is to stay abstinent, there are ways in order for someone to reduce the chances of getting the virus. These ways will not be completely safe, however they are good precautions to take if one was going to get involved in sexual activities. One of these ways to help is using condoms the right way every time, and there are a lot of additional ways that someone could be further protected as well. If these precautions were also taught in schools, this could make it so that if people were going to have sex, they could at least go about it in a safer way.

Though it is hard to give everyone information on the topic, there are ways it can reach more people. For example, making it mandatory for students to learn about the disease and/or even sex education in their

school can make a big impact on the number of Zimbabweans that know and are aware about the topic. Making it mandatory for students to learn about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) would not be nearly as costly of a solution as other ways to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS such as antiretrovirals. Another way to take this solution a step further, education on this topic could be taught other places occasionally, such as markets and clinics. This could help people learn about HIV regardless of their financial status.

HIV/AIDS is a big problem for teens and young adults specifically in Zimbabwe. Since prevention is a big part in the solution for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, targeting those who are mainly affected will make it so that the success of this solution will be higher than other possible solutions. Having teens learn about how this virus could affect them and how it is spread could allow for more caution.

Like other solutions, there are a couple factors that go into this plan that must work out. For example, finding people to teach the issue to others is essential. These people who are willing to talk about the topic could come from numerous organizations such as the CDC or different organizations that are knowledgeable on HIV/AIDS. Funding for this solution could come from the UN and/or other countries that are willing to help. Schools in Zimbabwe also have to be willing to enforce this topic in being mandatory for students to take.

Even though making courses in schools mandatory would be able to reach many Zimbabweans, one needs to also take into consideration the fact that not everyone goes to school. Some Zimbabweans may drop out early or simply be homeschooled. This is because homeschooling is a much more affordable option. Because of this, information on HIV/AIDS should not be limited to just schools, but other public places such as markets. This way almost everyone will have access to this education. Obviously, there will still be some people who won't get informed because they may not go out or for some other reasons they may have. However, having this education available in locations other than schools will still allow more people to have access to learn more about HIV/AIDS and ways on how to prevent it. The main cost of this solution would come down to the educators pay. An average salary for a teacher in Zimbabwe is about 200 USD a month as of 2021 (*Zimbabwe Teachers' USD Salaries from 2016 to 2021*). The total cost, then would be made up of the teachers' salary and the cost of the course as a whole.

The cost to fund these courses would come from organizations that deal with and help fund education. Some examples of these organizations are Education International and The Global Partnership for Education. A lot of these organizations, such as The Global Partnership for Education, focus on strengthening education for developing countries, like Zimbabwe. Many of these organizations helping out with the cost of this solution would allow for these courses to be easily paid for since the cost to implement this would not be big.

Another solution that could be helpful in Zimbabwe is providing free antiretroviral. An antiretroviral is drug that works against retroviruses such as HIV. Although HIV cannot be treated, its effects can be slowed with medication and there are drugs that can be taken to help those who are not infected. Providing antiretrovirals for free to those who need them will help slow down the spread of HIV and allow an opportunity for those who can't regularly afford these types of medications to receive the help that they need. This solution is more of one that takes on the virus directly rather than just informing the public. This approach will target the virus directly and will almost guarantee the slow of HIV (*Free ARVs Available from Next Month*).

Providing antiretrovirals for free to the public will also allow those who would generally not be able to afford these medications to get the chance to receive the drugs without worrying about the cost or where they will find the money to get the chance to live longer. Since Zimbabwe has a high poverty rate, many of those infected with the disease could not even think about affording such a costly medication, but with

the medication for free, they are able to acquire the antiretrovirals. This will allow lower-income individuals to receive equal opportunities as those who are able to afford these antiretrovirals.

One of the reasons that this solution could be more challenging than others is because of the cost. These antiretrovirals are costly and Zimbabwe would most likely need help from other countries and organizations to be able to afford these drugs. With the medication costing Zimbabweans right now, very few are able to afford them, which causes them to lose the opportunity of a longer life (*Free ARVs Available from Next Month*). Because these drugs are so expensive, it will be hard to provide a large quantity of them to those who are in need of them. This becomes more and more difficult as the number of people living with HIV/AIDS rises over time.

This problem is not without solution, however. There are a couple different solutions for how Zimbabwe could go about with funding for antiretrovirals. One form of funding could come from the Zimbabwean tax dollars that are already going towards HIV/AIDS related problems. Zimbabwe can repurpose the use of the money from the tax dollars and put it towards the cost of the antiretrovirals. Because this tax has already been in place, it would not be taking any more money from Zimbabwe citizens. This tax, the AIDS Levy, is a 3% tax on income and profits (*Zimbabwe: AIDs Levy Generates New Resources for Treatment*). Another way these antiretrovirals can be funded are by organizations who already help Zimbabwe. Some examples of these organizations that could help with costs are MedSend and Partners Worldwide.

This solution would have a number of other problems as well. For example, most likely, the main places the antiretrovirals would be available in would be in urban areas. Although there are many individuals that live in urban places in Zimbabwe infected with HIV/AIDS, many of those infected with the virus live in rural areas. This does not mean that it is not important that urban areas receive the antiretrovirals, it means it is equally important that rural areas are able to receive them as well. It is understandable of why it is harder to reach the rural areas in Zimbabwe since there are not necessarily many places of where these drugs could be handed out.

What this solution would have to consider are all the aspects that go along with it. This means one would have to consider the logistics of the plan. With free antiretrovirals available, this does not mean that anyone could come and take the medicine they need, antiretrovirals are not over the counter drugs, therefore, doing this would be illegal. There would need to be a system be put in place in order for those who need the antiretrovirals would be able to obtain them. In Zimbabwe, STI/STD testing is free, therefore, it would be easy for Zimbabweans to get tested and get the prescription for the antiretrovirals they need.

This approach, even though it would be challenging and take some time to put in action, it would tremendously help with those infected and even those who aren't infected. These antiretrovirals are also able to help prevent the virus for those who have not been infected. Again, prevention is a key part in solving the HIV/AIDS issue since this virus is incurable. This will help slow the spread of the virus as it will be harder for the virus to spread. Even with the drugs, however, education is still very important as people need to still be aware of how the virus is spread and how to avoid it.

Although both approaches would help with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the solution that would probably be the better option would be to provide education about the disease in a variety of different locations. This is because, first of all, this approach is a lot more affordable and can still reach a wide variety of people. While offering free antiretrovirals to the public will also reach numerous Zimbabweans, it would be harder to provide the drugs to rural areas. Teaching about HIV/AIDS and even other sexually transmitted diseases can not only be taught about all over and reach those even in rural areas, but it can also allow

people to know the truth about these viruses, how they are spread, and how they can avoid them. Knowledge on the topic is sometimes more important than treating the virus after being infected.

HIV in Zimbabwe has become quite the issue over the years. This does not mean that there are not ways to improve this problem. By either providing education over the topic or allowing free access to antiretrovirals that slow the spread of the virus, Zimbabwe can help fight the disease and help it's people.

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