



New Aids drug on the way

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A new class of Aids management drugs, and the only option for patients who have developed resistance to current antiretrovirals, will be available in Kenya within an year. But at what cost?

Clinicians estimate that one out of every five HIV patients in Kenya have already developed resistance to the antiretrovirals. "The situation is already running out of hand," says Dr Jacob Joseph, a specialist at the Coptic Hospital in Nairobi, the biggest supplier of ARVs in East and Central African.

Access to the new drugs is good news, says Dr Joseph, but the costs could be prohibitive when they finally land in Africa, "what with developers wanting to recoup their research costs and placement of patents".

The new drugs are being assessed for approval in the US, United Kingdom and Japan. At a recent international conference on Aids medication in San Francisco, three companies presented promising data showing the drugs worked even in patients with drug-resistant HIV strains.

Drug-resistant strains

This comes at a time when the global medical sector is pondering what to do with patients who have developed resistance to the three main classes of ARVs.

When people with drug-resistant strains infect others, the latter are not treatable. "This is the biggest challenge in HIV treatment today," says Dr Joseph. It means that the new patients cannot respond to any of the existing drugs from the word go. And it has further complicated treatment since the most vulnerable groups are getting infected with a germ that is already resistant to the existing drug options.

In a 2002 study of more than 1,600 patients in the UK, it was reported that five to six per cent had exhausted all available treatment options. Now there are fears that the number is much higher.

Details of the new class of drugs indicate that they will offer a much less frequent dose – once a week or once in a day for very severe cases. "When approvals are given, we plan to move fast and explore the possibility of importing the drugs to Africa, though we suspect serious cost implications," said Dr Joseph.

Disable the virus

The two completely new ARV classes in development are integrase inhibitors and maturation inhibitors. Integrase inhibitors target and disable the virus' enzyme, which plays a key role in replication, while maturation inhibitors interfere with the final stages of HIV replication.

These drugs would prevent the virus from assembling properly, from forming a protective outer coat, or from emerging – also known as budding – from human cells.

The world depends on what is called Highly Active Anti Retroviral Therapy, or HAART, which is a combination of three or more antiretroviral drugs. But some patients have developed resistance to all three existing classes of drugs.