

HIV and AIDS

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Partnerships in Action - Fighting HIV

Statistics show that while the attention of South African people and the world's media was focused on the political and social change occurring in South Africa, HIV was silently gaining a stronghold. People failed to realise its impact until infection rates began to accelerate, rapidly reaching a current prevalence of one in four people. Eskom Holdings Limited was one of a small number of companies to take action and one of a few to take effective action beyond the workplace.

With a workforce of 30 000 people spread throughout the country, Eskom leadership made a commitment to confront the epidemic in 1987 through the implementation of an integrated strategy designed to establish a workplace free from discrimination and stigmatisation, and to ensure that all employees had access to HIV and AIDS education as well as medical treatment.

"The human resources risk associated with AIDS is too high to sit back and ignore," said Eskom's Chief Executive, Thabang Gcabashe. "It takes a lot of time to train people; to give them the right exposure and get them to a level of productivity within the organisation." The cost of managing AIDS was seen as a necessary business strategy.

As passionate in the fight against AIDS as they are to be Africa's premier low-cost energy provider, Eskom has done more than devise an effective workplace programme for dealing with HIV and AIDS; they have actively embarked on a programme of "Partnerships in Action", forming effective associations with organisations that are actively affecting the outcome of the war against the virus.

"Different partners have different competencies," said Mpho Letlape, Eskom's Human Resources Director. "We need them: doctors, government, NGOs, labour, people with HIV and we need to work together to cover all the bases in our fight against HIV and AIDS." Partnerships in Action - SABCOHA

Eskom was one of the founding members of the South African Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS (SABCOHA) - a coalition of 36 corporate and 15 small- to medium-sized businesses with the goal of co-ordinating business response to the epidemic in South Africa through networking with government, private sector and international organisations and sharing outcomes of HIV programmes in order to develop a set of best business practices with respect to HIV and AIDS. SABCOHA recently developed a user-friendly toolkit to assist businesses with the implementation of HIV and AIDS policies and best practices in the workplace and Eskom has committed to purchasing 1 000 of these kits between 2004 and 2006, which they will give to their contractors and suppliers to assist SABCOHA in its goal of speeding up business response to AIDS. "Eskom plays the biggest role in SABCOHA that I am aware of," said SABCOHA CEO, Brad Mears. "Their multifaceted approach to HIV and AIDS is unparalleled in the private sector." Partnerships in Action - GBC

When Eskom joined the Global Business Coalition against HIV and AIDS (GBC) in 1998 it was GBC's first partner in Africa. Committed to harness the individual and collective power of the world's top corporations to fight the spread of AIDS at local, national and international levels, GBC hopes to accelerate the corporate community's involvement in this important global health crisis through identifying and disseminating models of good business practice, while providing technical expertise where needed and encouraging shared learning around the globe. "Eskom is very important to the rest of the world," said Carol O'Brien, Director of the African Office of GBC. "They are leading the fight against HIV and are taking what they have learnt and sharing it; so as not to waste valuable time and resources." Partnerships in Action - FPD

Medical professionals (including doctors and nurses) who qualified prior to 1990 have little or no training in HIV and AIDS and do not know how to effectively deal with the virus. To address this issue, Eskom joined forces with the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD), the largest private sector provider of health sector-specific educational programmes, with the mission to improve healthcare in Africa through education. With start-up funding of R6 million Eskom helped to launch the biggest HIV and AIDS training intervention for healthcare practitioners worldwide. The African AIDS Training Partnership began in 2003 and will have trained 13 000 doctors, nurses and healthcare professionals by the end of 2005. With additional assistance in the form of collaborative fundraising, Eskom has helped raise a further R20 million to foster the goal of training 60 000 healthcare professionals. Partnerships in Action - SAAVI

The South African AIDS Vaccination Initiative (SAAVI) was to develop and test an affordable, effective and locally relevant HIV vaccine for southern Africa. SAAVI was initiated by Eskom and the South African government and has grown into a global leader co-ordinating the activities of various people involved in many diverse activities related to HIV vaccine development.

In 2003, Eskom contributed R75 million to SAAVI for the development and testing of HIV vaccines in South Africa. This is the largest corporate contribution to HIV development anywhere in the world. Eskom contributed a further R15 million in

2004 and has committed to funding research by a further R30 million by 2007 bringing Eskom's contribution to South African vaccine development to more than R100 million. Partnerships in Action WEF; GHI; GF

Eskom's experiences in the management of HIV and AIDS have both national and global significance. The knowledge gained through years of research and intervention provides a valuable model for other organisations in Africa (the current epicentre of the disease) and the rest of the world to take note of.

With this in mind Eskom liaises and participates in the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Global Health Initiative (GHI) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GF).

Eskom's partnership with FPD is a great example of business making a difference in the fight against HIV and AIDS, says Haiko Alfield, the World Economic Forum's Director for Africa. Furthermore, it provides a new model for public-private partnership that will have an impact beyond the borders of South Africa. Through our Global Health Initiative, Eskom plays a leading role in mobilising the business response to HIV and AIDS. We are convinced that this strong expression of corporate citizenship will lay a useful foundation for a deeper business engagement in NEPAD. We also hope that this new and tangible example in action will pave the way for greater private sector participation in the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Partnerships in Action GIPA

The Greater Involvement of People Living with and directly affected by HIV and AIDS (GIPA) initiative was launched in South Africa as a tool to fight great levels of discrimination within the country and to remove the stigma related to being infected, by encouraging people to be tested for HIV and to be open about their status. The GIPA workplace model selected, trained and placed fieldworkers, openly living with HIV, in partner organisations and actively encouraged people to face up to the reality of living with HIV and dealing with HIV employees and co-workers.

Martin Vosloo was one of the first GIPA fieldworkers in South Africa. Diagnosed with HIV in 1990, he joined Eskom in 1997 to address staff on the realities of living with HIV. "There was a lot of confusion and lack of knowledge," said Martin. "It was difficult, but beneficial; by talking about HIV you help yourself and others" although there was a lot verbal abuse, and people wanted to kill me. But ultimately: If we, as infected people, don't stand up and talk about the realities of living with the disease, nobody else will."

Through collaboration with strategic partners Eskom has been able to encourage a uniquely South African solution to our AIDS epidemic and they will be showcasing the fact at the World AIDS Conference in Toronto next year. South Africa is not asking for handouts they are effectively forming partnerships and sharing knowledge to create an informed, intelligent, compassionate and integrated response to HIV. This article appeared in Leadership in HIV & AIDS. A shortened version was used for Eskom's internal newsletter.