

New Toolkit boosts South African companies' response to TB threat

3 June 2008

The Global Health Initiative of the World Economic Forum and the Lilly MDR-TB Partnership launch toolkit to help South African companies tackle the continent's tuberculosis crisis. It has emerged that more than 70 percent of TB patients in South Africa are also infected with HIV, meaning that an integrated approach to care is essential.

Development of the new toolkit comes as South Africa faces an emerging threat of TB/HIV co-infections and fatal drug-resistant strains of the disease. Developed in collaboration with the Lilly MDR-TB Partnership and with inputs from national and international partners including private sector representatives, the toolkit provides concrete guidelines to help South African companies rapidly increase their TB control programmes by adopting a joint approach to tackling TB and HIV.

With a staggering 70% of TB patients in South Africa infected with HIV, the importance of an integrated approach to care is clear. The South African government has recognized the importance of engaging the private sector to achieve its TB case detection and treatment targets. Companies in South Africa have the opportunity to catalyse effective public-private partnerships to facilitate successful patient and programme management. This would eventually lessen the economic impact of TB, which leads to a decline in worker productivity estimated at US\$ 13 billion annually.

“ Businesses have a fundamental responsibility towards both their employees and the wider community, and for preservation of their long-term interests by ensuring the national development of human capital to drive economic growth,” said Alex Azar, Eli Lilly and Company’s Senior Vice-President for Corporate Affairs and Communications. “ Tuberculosis has the capacity to undermine all of this. ”

The TB toolkit aims to shatter the cycle of transmission that so often defines the gravity of TB. By intercepting the progression of the disease and its lethal synergy with HIV/AIDS, businesses can better leverage their existing health infrastructures and management tools and resources to greater effect. Combined with the technical expertise and knowledge available under South Africa’s National TB Programme (NTP) and the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP), companies can provide a critical mass of resources for successful TB control.

“ It’s a disturbing paradox to think that people should die from a curable disease like tuberculosis,” said Dr Shaloo Puri, Head of the India Business Alliance, and India and Tuberculosis Advisor at the Global Health Initiative of the World Economic Forum. “ The sooner South African businesses start awakening to the extent of the problem, the sooner they can understand the associated risks in the workforce and to their business. ”

On a practical level, the toolkit will help companies increase opportunities and activities in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of TB/HIV co-infections in the workplace. These measures will in turn help alleviate the burden and costs associated with absenteeism, disrupted workflow and reduced productivity.

By engaging proactively with the community, which forms a key component of the overall business environment, businesses can offset the marginal cost of partnering with local stakeholders with the huge benefits they will reap through greater efficiency in the workplace and the good will in the community.

Although South Africa represents only 0.7% of the world’s population, it has 28% of the global number of HIV-positive TB cases. South African business leaders must start to recognize the crucial role they can play in TB care and the importance of the workplace setting as a win-win setting for TB control. Despite being preventable, treatable and curable, TB continues to devastate the continent. Unless individuals and organizations unite in

advocacy and action, everyone stands to lose.

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