

Mr Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki  
President  
Republic of South Africa  
Union Buildings  
West wing  
2nd Floor  
Government Avenue  
Pretoria

4 September 2006

Dear President Mbeki

### **EXPRESSION OF CONCERN BY HIV SCIENTISTS**

We are members of the global scientific community working on HIV/AIDS who wish to express our deep concern at the response of the South African government to the HIV epidemic.

HIV causes AIDS. Antiretrovirals are the only medications currently available that alleviate the consequences of HIV infection. The evidence supporting these statements is overwhelming and beyond dispute.

Much credit for the impressive advancement of HIV science belongs to scientists and clinicians based in South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent. Their expertise should play a critical role in alleviating the awful consequences HIV has caused to South African society. We are therefore deeply concerned at how HIV science has been undermined by the South African Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang.

Before and during the XVI International AIDS Conference, Dr Tshabalala-Msimang expressed pseudo-scientific views about the management of HIV infection. Furthermore, the South African government exhibition at the Conference featured garlic, lemons and African potatoes, with the implication that these dietary elements are alternative treatments for HIV infection. There is no scientific evidence to support such views. Good nutrition is important for all people, including people with HIV, but garlic, lemons and potatoes are not alternatives to effective medications to treat a specific viral infection and its consequences on the human immune system.

Over 5 million people live with HIV in South Africa. According to the best estimates of South African actuaries, over 500,000 people without access to antiretrovirals have reached the stage of HIV-disease when they now require these medicines to save their lives.

We commend the South African Department of Health's Operational Plan for Comprehensive HIV and AIDS Care, Management and Treatment for South Africa released on 19 November 2003. This plan committed to treating over 380,000 people by this time in the public health sector. Unfortunately, fewer than half of that target number are currently receiving treatment in the public sector. Many people are therefore dying unnecessarily.

We are also deeply concerned by the proliferation of unproven remedies being marketed in South Africa, some of them with the implicit or even explicit support of the Minister of Health. Slick marketing practices cause people not to take proven medications, or at best to waste money on false hopes. We condemn all those who profit from this type of quackery, at the expense of the sick and dying.

We echo the words of Mr Stephen Lewis, special advisor to the UN Secretary General, that South Africa's response to AIDS is "obtuse, dilatory and negligent".

Dr Mark Wainberg, chairperson of the XVI International AIDS Conference, stated in his Closing Address:

"We went to the Durban meeting, expecting a South African government that would be on the same side as us. Instead, we found a denialist president who turned his back on us... and who began to convene committees that would articulate on his behalf that somehow it was in dispute whether or not HIV was truly the cause of AIDS ... We were all completely taken aback, we were all insulted. ... I for one am no longer prepared to take a back seat as a scientist and not express my personal concern that this situation seems to have continued unabated."

We support and endorse Dr Wainberg's words.

To deny that HIV causes AIDS is farcical in the face of the scientific evidence; to promote ineffective, immoral policies on HIV/AIDS endangers lives; to have as Health Minister a person who now has no international respect is an embarrassment to the South African government. We therefore call for the immediate removal of Dr Tshabalala-Msimang as Minister of Health, and for an end to the disastrous, pseudo-scientific policies that have characterised the South African Government's response to HIV/AIDS.

Signed (in alphabetical order):

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