

**SPEECH READ BY MEC MAUREEN MODISELLE AT
THE DEPARTMENTAL CANDLE LIGHT MEMORAL**

DATE : 11TH MAY, 2007

VENUE : UNIBO CHAPEL

The H.O.D. Department of Finance

Senior Managers

Sectional Heads

Invited Guests

Staff

Guests from other departments and Non-Governmental

Organizations

All protocol observed. Good morning.

It is quite interesting that we have come to another observance of Candlelight Memorial. It is also very interesting to note that time runs imperceptibly!

I would like to say from the very onset and just to remind all of us that HIV/AIDS is the most serious public health challenge confronting the world today. It is real and not a joke. As we remember those who are affected or are living with the disease, we need to take cognizance of the fact that millions of people, citizens of countries worldwide have died from AIDS-related illnesses. Today as we observe the 2007 Candlelight Memorial, we need to recommit ourselves to promoting awareness, prevention and care. This is the time to remember that governments and citizens across the globe have the power to take actions that will save lives and ease suffering from an epidemic that devours the social foundations of entire countries, and this cannot be left to rage on.

It is appropriate that the Department of Finance is considering how we can offer corporate support and leadership to strengthen those living with HIV/AIDS. The question is how can we set an example of fighting discrimination and stigma at the workplace?

It is consequently no doubt that, throughout the world and of course in South Africa, several events are being organized as part of HIV/AIDS awareness, education and prevention strategies in the workplace. All these activities are campaigns to raise awareness about the disastrous effects of the pandemic.

However, stigma and discrimination are major impediments or challenges standing in the way of governments worldwide, civil society and campaigners. These two impediments have also had and still having major negative effects on persons who are aware that they have contracted the disease.

The reason for the stigma and discrimination can be attributed to the fact that people still view HIV/AIDS as a disease that results strictly from

immoral behaviour, and many influential community and religious leaders still discuss HIV/AIDS in these terms. In some countries, religious organizations, people in authority and

churches even fail totally to mention HIV/AIDS as if the disease were a taboo. Matters even become worse when a sufferer of the disease happen to be religious or a churchgoer, to the extent that churchgoers even refuse to be tested because they are scared o the stigma and discrimination that might accompany their decision to test or go public.

Colleagues, what we have to realize is to understand that it is only when a patient has been able to explain or tell a medical officers about his or her ailments that he or she can receive the appropriate prescription for treatment. I will like to quote from a USAID Report: ‘Telling Our Story’ and I quote: “As more HIV-positive Senior Managers and community leaders make their HIV/AIDS status public, more ordinary citizens are getting tests”, quote closed.

The challenge confronting all of us though is, understanding the plight of persons who have been hit by the pandemic and developing implementable policies to protect them. The fact of

the matter is the impact of HIV/AIDS poses a substantial problem on both employees and their families, and this is an undeniable fact!

To encourage or motivate departmental employees who have contracted the disease through any means, the following need to be done from the side all employers.

There is therefore the need to provide non-discriminatory working environmental policies for all employees.

Provide staff with guidelines on how to handle various issues relating to HIV/AIDS at the workplace.

Provide information to staff and their families on how they can protect themselves from contracting HIV/AIDS and to inform employees and their dependents who are living with the pandemic and how they can be assisted by government, organizations or departments they work for.

Colleagues, what we all need not forget is that a person who is **HIV** positive or has **AIDS** can continue to be a productive employee and an active participant in helping the Department to achieve its aims and objectives towards the fulfillment of our mandate.

To many people, a person acquires HIV/AIDS as a result of immoral or deviant behaviour. The challenge before all of us is to demystify this. That HIV/AIDS may result in medical conditions, which may impair the employee's health and his or her ability to perform effectively.

To surmount this challenge Departmental employees with HIV/AIDS should be given the same rights, benefits, and opportunities as employees with other serious diseases or illnesses.

Our employment practices should be based on the scientific and epidemiological evidence that people with HIV/AIDS infection do not pose a risk of transmission of the virus to co-workers through ordinary workplace interaction or contact.

Most top management and other senior managers should unequivocally endorse non-discriminatory employment practices and the Department Human Resources Directorate should provide education and programmes to disseminate information about HIV/AIDS.

The Department should communicate HIV/AIDS workplace policies and practices to staff in simple, clear and unambiguous terms and, should provide them with sensitive, accurate, and up-to-date information about risk-reduction in their personal lives.

The Department should also develop policies which will protect the confidentiality of employees' medical information. To prevent workplace disruption and rejection by co-workers of

employees with AIDS or HIV infection, the Department should undertake education of all employees.

Ladies and Gentlemen, staff of the Department of Finance or even any other person is under no obligation to disclose their HIV status to anyone at work unless they are requesting reasonable accommodations for their condition.

At this juncture colleagues, medical information submitted to senior management or any other staff member should be treated confidentially. We need to remember that in terms of a person's right to privacy, a person suffering from HIV/AIDS related cases should not be invaded. It is the right of the affected person to disclose his or her status to a person of his or her choice.

What we have to understand is that people affected by **HIV/AIDS**, just like any other persons with other chronic

illnesses, suffer periodic bouts of stress, requiring understanding, support and counseling.

I would therefore like to assure all those affected by **HIV/AIDS** and who continue working will by law be provided with reasonable accommodation in the same manner as other qualified individuals who need special accommodation. All our employees who are incapable of performing their duties due to illness or who have medical appointment may be granted sick leave, annual leave, or leave without pay to the extent they have accrued such leave under their terms of service, or as defined by the Department of Public Service and Administration.

I am hereby encouraging all Senior Managers and Supervisors to seek ways to accommodate such employees through measures such as alternative work circumstances or duties, as possible, facilitating access to health services outside the workplace, and allowing time off, using annual or sick leave to attend clinics or counseling sessions.

However colleagues, what is very crucial in this instance is to know whether we have been affected by anyone or have contracted the virus. Today's event should therefore not just centre around the question of disclosure. It is about my current status and yours! All employees are encouraged to know their HIV status to begin treatment as early as possible. Cases of rape and sexual assault should be reported to the police immediately and voluntary counseling and testing should be pursued at a government clinic or hospital or private provider of choice.

When it comes to peer support and counseling, the affected should understand that the purpose of counseling is to help employees decide whether or not to be tested, and to provide information on how to prevent **HIV** transmission. Those who are selected to offer counseling employees living with **HIV/AIDS** should therefore be trained in peer support and counseling. All employees who take up this role should respect confidentiality at all times. This responsibility should be part of

the employees' normal duties and therefore should be included in their job descriptions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the challenge to be addressed today as we commemorate the 2007 Candlelight Memorial is a daunting one. It is indeed a challenge for the new millennium, and a challenge that will require a change in the way we view **HIV/AIDS** as well as persons who have been affected by it.

We need new and concerted effort, better documentation, more open exchange of information, more involvement and professional respect for the experience of people living with **AIDS**.

However, we all share the same goals, no matter where we reside and no matter the positions of our countries: to stop the epidemic and to provide care and support to those already infected.

Ladies and Gentlemen, invited guests and colleagues working at the Department of Finance, it has been another wonderful privilege to address a group with such profound experience in providing support for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Whether affected or not, working as planners, programme managers, health providers, or providers of community care we are on the front lines in dealing with the issue at stake: dealing with HIV/ AIDS.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I must say that the purpose of the day will be defeated if those who are fit, well and uninfected fail to protect themselves. If we act now, many lives can be saved which will otherwise be destroyed forever. Colleagues, this is the vital challenge. I believe you have all heard of the old adage that: 'Prevention is better than cure'. As I have always reiterated, we do not have to wait until disaster strikes us in the face before we make radical changes.

In this first decade of the 21st Century the various risks connected with having sex have increased. The figures for HIV, gonorrhoea , Chlamydia, etc, are all going up. This is almost entirely because so many people – whether heterosexual or homosexual or bi-sexual do not practice safe sex. Statistics show that men and women are taking more and more sexual partners. Others go to the extent of joining sex clubs. Unfortunately, in most of these situations, people do not use condoms.

As for teenagers they are now losing their virginity very young and unfortunately, at an age when they do not even know how to protect themselves against the unwanted consequences of sex. So, inevitably, there are times when teenage love-making, instead of being innocent has led to disaster and other serious consequences such as contracting AIDS.

Understandably, in all age groups a lot of men and women think that ‘it won’t happen to me’. But since the year 2005, there has

been so much sex infection around that everyone need to be very careful. Unless one is totally faithful to one partner, and she or he is totally faithful to themselves, the risk is very high indeed.

Inarguably, risks associated with unsafe sex are:

- * unwanted pregnancies
- * venereal diseases such as gonorrhoea and commonly syphilis.
- * other sexually transmitted infections such as herpes, pubic lice etc.
- * HIV – the virus which can cause AIDS.
- * cancer of the cervix

- * female infertility due to pelvic infection cause by sex with an infected male.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many infections that are associated with unsafe sex, may be some have not even yet been diagnosed even though they are in existence.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the English say a stitch in time saves nine. The heart of the matter is: 'If you are going to have sex with someone who is not your regular partner (I am not encouraging unfaithfulness), you should always use a condom. But the safest thing to do is to remain faithful to your partner

I would like to conclude by saying that I am indeed honoured to be part of this year's Candlelight Memorial. I sincerely applaud you for your sterling work in enhancing awareness and in your endeavour to sensitize fellow employees regarding the AIDS pandemic. You are also applauded for the concern you are showing to the staff of the Department of Finance in ensuring that they are all safe and productive irrespective of their status.

I thank you.