

Pharmaceuticals

Gates And Merck Combat AIDS In Botswana

Matthew Herper, 09.30.03, 7:30 AM ET

NEW YORK - As part of a \$100 million AIDS-fighting effort put in place by **Merck** and **Bill Gates'** charitable foundation, a Harvard-educated doctor, **Ernest Darkoh**, has been fighting to get HIV-combating drugs to the people of Botswana, where 38% of adults are infected with the virus. At first glance, it is a bleak task.

Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone, Botswana, is believed to be treating more AIDS patients than any other hospital in the world. Five out of every six beds are taken up by patients whose immune systems have been compromised by the HIV virus. In Botswana, a relatively well-off African nation, most people do not know whether or not they are carrying the virus. Meanwhile, AIDS kills three people every minute there. Darkoh says adult patients coming to clinics for treatment are often already very sick, some having withered down to as little as 50 pounds.

"One of the things we brutally acknowledge," Darkoh says, "is a lot of people are going to die before we get to them. That is what we get starting to treat people 15 years into an epidemic."

The Merck Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation teamed in 1999 with Botswana's government in a public-private alliance called the African Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Partnerships, to prevent the spread of AIDS there. Darkoh's program, called Masa, or "new dawn," is a lynchpin in that effort. Masa has enrolled more than 10,000 people since January 2001, and 8,000 are receiving anti-retroviral drugs made by such firms as Merck (nyse: [MRK](#) - news - people), **GlaxoSmithKline** (nyse: [GSK](#) - news - people) and **Bristol-Myers Squibb** (nyse: [BMY](#) - news - people). (Merck donates its drugs for free). Starting in 2004, the program expects to begin enrolling 10,000 people per year. Still, at that rate, it would take a decade to enroll all of the at least 110,000 people who are eligible. Even so, **Banu Khan**, Botswana's national AIDS coordinator, recently said she believes the epidemic there has reached a plateau.



Bill Gates holds a baby who is taking part in a malaria treatment program. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is using its money to fight the disease.

Several factors, borne of the efforts of Gates and Merck, are fueling this nationwide triage. Schools are learning to educate the populace about HIV--half of them already have the equipment needed for public TV programs to help break the silence. Efforts are being made to encourage safer sex; students on college campuses are being given coupons for CDs or books if they are carrying a condom. And the Masa program that Darkoh runs offers people a reason to care about their HIV status. "Until 21 months ago, AIDS was a death sentence," Darkoh says. "Anti-retroviral therapy finally gives you a reason to know."

Eighty-five percent of the patients who get the drugs take them exactly as prescribed and stay on them. One reason: Darkoh recognizes that treating AIDS in Africa is different than treating it in the West. Medicine can be delivered far outside a hospital or clinic. In Botswana, patients tend to see traditional healers long before going to a doctor. "[Traditional healers] are the first point of care," Darkoh says, "and they actually own the souls of the people." There are 50 times as many traditional healers as medical doctors, and Botswana has made an effort to get the healers on board.

But obstacles keep piling up. Early estimates had patients visiting four times per year, but the people who were sickest--and least able to be helped by a cocktail of anti-retroviral drugs--came forward first. These sick patients see the doctor four to five times per month. To make sure the drugs reach people who are infected but not yet sick, Darkoh has been splitting the lines in the clinics in two. If patients who are infected but not yet sick receive drugs early, they will stay well for a long time, remain productive and be less of a drain on health care services. The only other way to slow the progress of the disease with medicine would be to develop a vaccine to prevent or treat the disease. Merck, The Gates Foundation and **Aventis** (nyse: [AVE](#) - news - people) are among those working to produce one.

When Bill Gates visited Botswana last week, the **Microsoft** (nasdaq: [MSFT](#) - news - people) billionaire was astounded that more people were not getting tested for HIV. It is a topic close to Darkoh's heart. He hopes that, in the coming months, Botswana's government will make testing standard for all patients, unless they say they do not want it. "It should be malpractice not to do it," he says. This flies in the face of guidelines established by the World Health Organization, but Darkoh feels these guidelines were not made for Africa.

"It's hobbled us in our ability to reach the people we need to reach," he says. "These standards were developed around Western countries...a lot of that doesn't apply here. These are prevalence levels I don't think the world has ever seen."

It is not only the sick in Africa, after all, who do not get tested when they should. HIV has a way of eluding containment and showing up where it is least expected. Doctors must be brought to Botswana from abroad. They leave their jobs, move their families. Before they begin working, they are tested for the HIV virus. Darkoh remembers one physician who tested positive for the virus.

"He showed up in my office completely shell-shocked," Darkoh says. "He would not be able to work, he was stranded, and he's in my office saying, 'What am I going to do?'"