

# THISDAY

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## Revealed: How ministry officials rejected cheaper AIDS machines

TWO independent studies have revealed that government officials could have deliberately ignored more efficient and cost-effective machines used to measure the immune systems of HIV/Aids patients before they were put on life-prolonging drugs.

Separate studies by Stanford University of the United States and the University of Zimbabwe have confirmed that the Cyflow CD4 count machines that the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare rejected outright were, in fact, scientifically more appropriate for use in poor countries like Tanzania.

Ministry officials disqualified the more cost-effective Cyflow CD4 count machines in favour of FacsCount machines.

Investigations by THISDAY revealed that the government could have potentially saved billions of shillings if it had opted for the more cost-effective Cyflow machines. The ministry says it bought each unit of the FacsCount machines at \$36,000 (around 40m/-), with reagents costing \$8.5 (around 10,000/-) per test.

Surprisingly, the Cyflow CD4 count machines have a unit cost of just \$27,000 (around 30m/-) with reagents costing between \$4.5 and \$ 6 (less than 7,000/-) per test.

In a recent media statement, the Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Prof. David Mwakyusa, defended the ministry's choice of FacsCount machines against Cyflow, arguing that the Cyflow machines had failed key technical benchmarks during evaluation tests in 2004.

"Results of Cyflow indicated that its efficiency did not meet key benchmarks established by the ministry. For example, on CD4 counts of below 200, the machine recorded very poor results of 48 per cent," Prof. Mwakyusa said.

The minister maintained in his statement that the Cyflow CD4 count machines were also unreliable in testing children. The CD4 Count is a measure of the strength of the immune system. Since HIV, the virus that causes Aids continually kills CD4 cells, the body cannot replace these lost CD4 cells and their number declines over time.

A normal CD4 count is 1,000 and the body starts to get more frequent common infections at around a count of 400. At around a CD4 count of 200, the body becomes susceptible to many unusual infections, and patients have to be put on anti-retroviral therapy to prolong their lives.

However, despite the minister's statement condemning the Cyflow CD4 count machines, research shows that the equipment can competently establish the CD4 count and CD4 percentage in people of all ages and sex, including children.

The studies indicate that there is close correlation between results obtained from Cyflow and FacsCount machines.

According to one of the studies, blood samples from 150 people infected by the virus were collected and analyzed using the American made Becton and Dickinson made FacsCount machine and German made Partec, Munster Cyflow SL.

## Other news

### Letter from Washington with MWAMOYO HAMZA

Coming Out of the Shadows!

### Defiant pastoralists testing government resolve on environment

THE return of pastoralists to the vast Kilombero River Basin is, to say the least, the saddest news ever reported this week as far as the national agenda of environmental conservation is concerned. Hardly has a month passed since these people were driven

### The day PSPF 'walked' into unknown liabilities

NEWLY uncovered details about the 36bn/- Quality Plaza deal reveal that the Public Service Pensions Fund actually bought shares into a private company known as "Quality Plaza Limited" not just the building itself.

## Sports news

### Govt to construct new cricket arena

THE government has reiterated its commitment to promote cricket in the country and has promised to construct a modern ground in Dar es Salaam.

### Simba, Yanga meet again Sept.30

THE country's soccer giants, Simba and Young Africans, renew their rivalry on September 30 when they lock horns in a return leg-tie of the 2006 Vodacom Premier League at the National Stadium in Dar es Salaam.

### Mponji to face Kenyan for WBF belt

Tanzania's Venance Mponji is aiming to wrestle the World Boxing Foundation (WBF) inter-continental super-featherweight title from it Kenyan holder David Kiilu when the two meet at the Nyayo Stadium Gymnasium, Nairobi on September 3.

"Using linear regression analysis, there was a very strong correlation ( $R=0.991$ ) between the overall CD4 T-lymphocyte counts obtained by FacsCount and those obtained by Cyflow," the report states.

On absolute CD4 T-lymphocytes, the results indicated close correlation of  $R=0.995$  and  $R=0.991$  between the overall counts obtained by FacsCount and Cyflow counters. The German made machines were however, found to be more convenient for use by a poor country like Zimbabwe.

"Cyflow cytometry is relatively affordable, easy to use technology that is useful not only in identifying HIV seropositive individuals who require antiretroviral therapy (ART) but also for monitoring immunologic responses to ART," the report whose lead author Prof. Lynn Zijenah of College of Health Sciences at University of Zimbabwe said.

The report further points out that apart from price and user-friendly technology: "The Cyflow counter also has a high throughput and as many as 200 specimens can be run per day, making it ideal for use in Zimbabwe, a country with one of the highest prevalence of HIV globally." The Stanford University report obtained similar results.

"From these data, it is concluded that the Partec Cyflow SL assay performance is to a level comparable to that of the FDA approved BD FACS Calibur/Sysmex dual platform method hence can be used in the monitoring of CD4 and CD4 percentage measures in the treatment and monitoring of HIV/AIDS patients," the report concludes.

Investigations by THISDAY have established that a single businessman based in Dar es Salaam, Mr Bharat Rajan of Biocare Health Services Limited has been given a monopoly in selling the FacsCount CD4 Count machines and its reagents to the ministry.

Mr Rajan's company is also the exclusive supplier of the controversial Capillus and Determine HIV rapid test kits.

Medical experts have criticized the government's preference for the Capillus test kits that require a cold chain storage in a country where 90 per cent of the people do not have access to electricity.