

PAMOJA and International Partners Demand Better HIV Care Following Teen's Death in Makete District, Tanzania

The death of Veneranda Sanga, 17, is the latest and the most tragic death

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The following statement is issued by Vienna-based NGO PAMOJA - supporters of the African move against reft and corruption, along with international partners, on the state of care of persons living with HIV-AIDS in Makete District: The death of Veneranda Sanga, 17, on February 28, 2009, is the latest and in some ways the most tragic death of members of the HIV-AIDS patient activist group PIUMA ('<http://www.piuma-simba.org>') in Makete District, Tanzania.

PIUMA has lost nearly 20 percent of its members - 46 men and women - since the Austrian government cofunded HIV Care and Treatment Program at Bulongwa Lutheran Hospital (BLH) that PIUMA co-managed was forcibly closed using armed guards by hospital authorities in April 2006. Many of these deaths are due to the appallingly inadequate treatment available to them in their home district.

The Vienna-based NGO Pamoja and the Canadian Friends of Highlands Hope join in condemning the failure of local, regional and national health authorities to provide even minimally effective care for persons living with HIV-AIDS in the Bulongwa area of Makete District. As a child and adolescent victim of the HIV pandemic, Veneranda Sanga tested HIV positive at the EAWM financed Care and Treatment Centre in Bulongwa Lutheran Hospital in 2005. She began ARV treatment and her condition was monitored using technologies that allowed for proper assessment of a critical indicator of health status - the patient's cd4 count - for children and adolescents with HIV. Unfortunately, the program where she was receiving this care was forced to close in 2006 by corrupt local church officials intent on stealing health care moneys from international donors and government grants.

The quality of care available to Veneranda and other members of PIUMA plummeted at this point and the mortality rate of PIUMA members has spiked to an internationally unprecedented high level for people under HIV treatment and care. The BLH is infamous for its poor conditions and inadequate staffing and treatment resources - in part due to extensive theft of hospital resources by managers. Added to that, the national government of Tanzania regulated the use of just one brand of cd4 counter from an American supplier that is incapable of assessing the immune status of children. Independent reviews of this decision by the Tanzanian Ministry of Health have revealed inadequate scientific procedures and have suggested that payments exchanged hands to buy the outcome.

Veneranda's situation is made even more appalling by the fact that, as an orphan, she was under the care of a Lutheran-sponsored orphanage in Bulongwa. Even though her medical condition was worsening for many weeks, she was only sent to hospital days before her death and then only transferred to a hospital with high quality care (Ikonda Consolata Hospital) at the insistence and the expense of PIUMA. Unfortunately, the transfer was too late to save Veneranda's life.

The Lutheran World Federation in Geneva and German Lutheran donors and churches have largely failed to address the situation at Bulongwa Lutheran Hospital even though they fund the health care activities of the Lutheran church in Tanzania and have been aware of problems and human rights abuses in Bulongwa since 2006.

Pamoja and Canadian Friends of Highlands Hope demand that local and national health authorities intervene immediately in the Bulongwa region of Makete District to address the shockingly bad state of care and treatment of PLWHAs there. No one should die from HIV because of incompetence, corruption, and bureaucratic lethargy, as Veneranda and more than forty other PIUMA members did.

Comments

"Denying people who live with HIV/AIDS the best available, state-of-the-art HIV/AIDS treatment and care is equivalent to actively killing them!" says Dr. Rainer Brandl, a physician from Austria who was director of the AIDS clinic at the Lutheran Hospital that was forced to stop working in 2006. "Very few people anywhere in the world will die of HIV-AIDS if they are diagnosed in time and given basic, proper treatment that includes not only Antiretroviral Drugs (ARVs) but also good Tuberculosis Care. The life-saving effect of existing antiretroviral drugs is well known, especially when it is coupled with high quality cd4 counting.

All of this was available at Bulongwa Lutheran Hospital in 2005 when Veneranda and others began receiving treatment. These services were brought down by criminal behaviour by clergy and church employees whose only concern is money." "Veneranda's life with AIDS and her untimely death underscore a number of serious failures in the care that is provided by local hospitals and health care workers under the umbrella of the Lutheran Church of Tanzania which is member of the Lutheran World Federation," continues Dr. Brandl.

Dr. Brandl is a member of Pamoja and is currently doing graduate studies in Tropical Medicine at Mahidol University in Bangkok.

"The story of the cd4 counters is a national disgrace," says Jackson Mbogela, former coordinator of PIUMA who is currently pursuing graduate studies in the Netherlands. "PIUMA members on ARVs have gone months and months without proper testing, and the rate of regular cd4 testing has fallen by more than half compared to levels in 2005. Many patients have not been tested until their immune systems are already severely damaged. The BD cd4 counter at BLH is reported to be broken most of the time and could never assess children with HIV even when working. According to a recent study, infrequent or late cd4 counts shorten life and increase mortality among PLWHAs."

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