

HIV/AIDS FEATURE

Healing wounds in the shadow

Ethiopia's children are often left to fend for themselves when disease strikes. But true leadership and generosity can be found among those struggling hardest for survival



With a wetted towel 20-year-old Rahel gently cleans the wounds of the patient sitting in front of her. The early sunlight falling through the window reveals many other visible signs of AIDS on the patient's legs, but the young health worker carries on while keeping a low and intimate conversation. After one hour of work every wound is washed, treated with cream made from herbs and covered with soft cotton plasters.

Health worker and patient have a lot in common. They share the same age, they live in the same neighborhood and they are both infected with HIV. They are two of several thousand young people in Ethiopia destined to carry a virus for which there currently is no treatment. Not only infected, facing a death too soon, but also victims of the stigma and discrimination surrounding the epidemic.

"I used to have four brothers and one sisters, now I have no one. They all consider me dead. This is why I know exactly how my patients feel," said Rahel, who is working full time as volunteer at Mekidm, an association for orphans and people living with HIV/AIDS located in Dessie, Ethiopia's Amhara Region.

The girl has been a member of the association for two years, working for the last 6 months with home-based care and counseling. In her spare time she visits schools, churches and market places to speak about her own experiences. "They both resent me and respect me. At first most people don't believe that a young and healthy looking girl like me can be HIV-positive. They listen, ask questions, but they never come near me."

Mekidm's compound in Dessie is a sanctuary for people left behind by relatives and society. Orphans roam around between the buildings while their grandmothers patiently wait in the shadow of the large eucalyptus tree standing tall in the middle of the lawn. With UNICEF support Mekidm is also assisting their members financially. Each orphaned child can receive school material, clothes and 70 birr (app. \$8 US) a month to cover living expenses.

"This is all we have. I am too old to work now, and we are the only family members left," said Shewaye Gebre, a 75-year-old grandmother with two children to care for.

The youngest child, Rediem, 5, was born with the virus which killed her mother two year ago. She has been diagnosed as a full-blown AIDS case, but is playing happily with the other children in the compound. The grandmother, who spends most of her time in churches, believes that the child will get better.

"I pray that this child will get well and one day take the place of my lost daughter."

A thin man, not older than 30, works as a guard for the association. "I am positive", is his first reply when asked about his wellbeing. "I have been positive for two years, but my children are healthy," he continues, while keeping a carefully calculated distance. Most of the 13 staff members in Mekidm's Dessie -branch are living with the virus. They have all experienced the stigma shared by most people affected by the disease in the country.

"Their self-esteem is usually very low, said Teamet Missanaw, coordinator for the organization in Dessie and HIV-negative. "But some of them discover that they are actually needed and that they can make a difference. They find a new reason to keep on fighting."

Ethiopia has one of the largest infected populations in the world, and the epidemic is spreading fast. An estimated 2.2 million people are living with the virus, including 200.000 children. Approximately 10 percent of these are full-blown AIDS cases.



5-year-old Rediem with her brother and grandmother

The disease is treatable, not curable, but effective anti-retroviral drugs are neither available nor affordable for the vast majority of the infected population. Instead symptoms are treated and care given when possible.

UNICEF, in close collaboration with the Government, local authorities and NGOs, is striving at improving the living conditions of people affected by HIV/AIDS. Ethiopia has endorsed a national HIV/AIDS policy, which clearly prioritizes care and support for those infected and those left behind. UNICEF is actively working with partners to strengthen and promote living positively and address the stigma that continues to prevent so many people getting the support they need.

"Often a talk and a hug is what people need. Most people have no one to share their sadness with, said Rahel. "I have realized that I can live with the virus, and I no longer feel anything about those in my family, who don't want to see me any more. That is their decision, I just want to live my life and do my best to help others live theirs."

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*For more information, please contact the UNICEF Communications Section,
telephone: 251-1-515155 or 444400; fax: 517111; e-mail: sbloemen@unicef.org*