

Haiti: Paediatric HIV treatments are saving children's lives



Seven-year-old Samson Verneret playing with his toys at home in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

By Kun Li and Sylvana Nzirorera

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, 18 October 2005 - Like any boy, 7-year-old Samson Verneret enjoys playing with his favourite toys. But unlike other children his age, Samson is living with HIV.

Infected at birth by his mother, who died of AIDS shortly thereafter, Samson was then abandoned by his aunt when she found out that he was HIV-positive. That's when he was adopted by Marie-Rose Verneret.

"He was an orphan and living with his aunt," recalled Marie-Rose. "I saw she was mistreating him and scared of him because of his HIV. So I told her that I would adopt the boy, and I did just that."

Having been HIV-positive for more than 10 years herself, Marie-Rose knows what it's like to face discrimination and stigma. When her family discovered her HIV status, they refused to talk to her, gave her a separate room, and even made funeral arrangements for her. Marie-Rose is trying her best to protect Samson from the same fate.

Gheskio Centre – first of its kind in Haiti

Hit hard by poverty, civil unrest, and natural disasters, Haiti's children are increasingly living under a new threat – the threat of HIV/AIDS. The country has the highest HIV infection rate in the entire Latin America and Caribbean region. To make matters worse, a large proportion of Haitians don't know enough about HIV/AIDS to protect themselves.

"We have 13,000 children born every year infected with [HIV]. Among these 13,000, only 300 of them have access to antiretroviral treatment," explained Ralph Midy, UNICEF Programme Officer in Haiti. Antiretroviral treatments and other drugs like cotrimoxazole are necessary to save the lives of children living with HIV/AIDS; without them, many children will die of infections such as pneumonia.

At the UNICEF-supported Gheskio Centre, a medical facility, children and adults like Marie-Rose and Samson are given free antiretroviral drugs. Founded in 1982, the centre has the most experienced medical team in Haiti. Collaborating with UNICEF since 1990, Gheskio also provides free HIV testing, counselling, and treatment for children and pregnant women. It's the first centre of its kind in Haiti.

"Unlike other health facilities, Gheskio Centre has a paediatric unit entirely dedicated for HIV-infected children," explained Marie Deschamps, Director of the Centre. "We need to focus more on the children, and we need to make parents and everyone in the Haitian communities aware that HIV/AIDS does exist among children."

Paediatric treatment

Thanks to the medications from Gheskio, both Marie-Rose and Samson are able to lead active, productive lives. Samson goes to school every day, while Marie-Rose spends some of her time working as an advocate for HIV/AIDS awareness.

"Before I was always very sick. After I took the medicine my mother gave me, I am not sick any more," said Samson.

But as HIV continues its relentless march across the world, children and young people find themselves increasingly at risk. Millions of young lives in Haiti and beyond are at stake. Supporting paediatric treatment for children like Samson is one of UNICEF's priorities in the fight against HIV/AIDS.