

PRESS RELEASE

Swaziland's ART Programme Receives a Boost

UNICEF supports the Ministry of Health to acquire a CD4 analyzer to monitor health of HIV+ patients

Manzini, November 2007 – HIV+ patients, especially pregnant mothers, will now find it much easier to access anti retroviral treatment in the Manzini region.

With support from UNICEF, the Ministry of Health installed a new CD4 analyzer machine at Raleigh Fitkin Memorial (RFM) Hospital on 13 November, 2007. A CD4 analyzer counts the number of CD4 cells in the blood of HIV-infected patients. This number is then used to monitor patients and gauge whether they need to begin anti retroviral treatment (ART). Patients with a CD4 count of lower than 250 are started on ART, while HIV+ pregnant women are started on ART with a count of 350. Once a patient begins treatment, CD4 counts are used to monitor that patient's progress.

"Laboratory monitoring of people living with HIV and AIDS forms a critical component of their care before they start ART and throughout their lives after starting ART," said Ms. Nomathemba Dlamini, Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Health. "One of the most important investigations for such patients is the CD4 cell count. So it is with great pleasure that we celebrate the donation of this machine to RFM, one of our country's busiest hospitals."

RFM Hospital did not previously have a CD4 machine. Patients in the region were forced to visit Mbabane Government Hospital or to have their blood drawn at RFM and then sent to Mbabane. This caused a delay of weeks and even months in getting test results and starting the needed treatment.

The new CD4 analyzer will also assist the national Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme. HIV+ pregnant mothers will now have another major hospital at which to access CD4 testing so that they can begin the necessary care and treatment to protect their baby from HIV infection.

"Swaziland has made excellent progress on PMTCT, increasing services from only 10 health facilities in 2004 to 71 in 2006," said Dr. Jama Gulaid, UNICEF Representative in Swaziland. "The number of pregnant women seeking HIV testing and counseling is increasing and more women are seeking treatment as a result. This CD4 analyzer will assist in servicing these pregnant women who wish to be a part of PMTCT services."

In addition to the CD4 analyzer machine given to RFM, UNICEF also donated a refrigerator to store specimens and materials to improve the existing laboratory.

"These donations from UNICEF help us to address the challenges of maintaining acceptable infection control at the laboratory," said Dr. Raymond Bitchong, Senior Medical Officer at RFM Hospital. "We will now be able to renovate the lab, making it cleaner for effective infection control, and have more space for working and to store back-up equipment."

Principal Secretary Dlamini also noted that the additional equipment and improvements at RFM will now allow for increased outreach and the roll out of ART services to more clinics.

"Previously, the country had only one CD4 count machine at the Mbabane Government Hospital," said PS Dlamini. "This new machine will now accelerate the mobile outreach services to the surrounding clinics in Manzini as RFM can now provide the necessary laboratory support."