

## **MoHSW Should Provide Accurate Information on Counterfeit ARVs**

**Sikika** was shocked to find out that almost 5,358 people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) in Dodoma who were on Anti Retro-viral Treatment (ARVs), had stopped taking the drugs.

The information published through different media outlets has come out at a time when HIV/AIDS stakeholders are considering investigation on fake ARVs. According to reports, the ARV drugs of type number TT-VIR (batch number oc.01.85) were distributed in Mara, Tanga and Dar es Salaam since May 2011.

The presence of fake ARVs and recent information about PLHIV abandoning the ARV drugs reflects weaknesses in the government systems and authorities responsible for managing the quality, suitability and availability of drugs. Perhaps it is possible that there is a close relationship between the presence of fake drugs in the country and the occurrence of PLHIV refusing to use the drugs.

The issue of patient medication largely depends on the level of trust between the service provider and the PLHIV who are using the ARVs drugs. The presence of counterfeit or low quality drugs may cause a patient to lose trust and stop using ARVs, which lead to their health being compromised.

Controversy about the presence of counterfeit ARVs has continued for about eight months now. There has been a problem in identifying the person directly responsible after the factory alleged to have manufactured the fake drugs, namely Tanzania Pharmaceuticals Industry (TPI), denied involvement in the manufacturing of the drugs, while the Tanzania Food and Drugs Authority (TFDA) and the Medical Stores Department (MSD) have stressed that the counterfeit drugs came from this factory.

Sikika values and recognizes the efforts by the government to take legal measures, which include inspection and laboratory investigations conducted by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare through TFDA. Other measures taken by the government include the closure of the TPI factory that was allegedly producing counterfeit ARVs, since the available documents at MSD proved that the fake drugs were from this factory. Three executives from MSD were suspended.

Also, the government banned the distribution and use of medication type TT-VIR 30 version number 0C .01.85, and has also ordered Local Government Authorities through the District Medical Officers, to recall the aforementioned fake drugs from health facilities and the public, and then send them back to MSD.

According to information provided by MSD, about 8,000 bottles out of more than 12,000 bottles of fake ARVs drugs were successfully recalled. There are approximately 4, 000 bottles still in circulation, of which nobody has any information on their whereabouts.

Government has forwarded the issue of fake ARVs to the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) for further investigation and legal action. However, despite these efforts from the government, Sikika is not satisfied with the pace on which the case is being tackled.

According to information from the office of the DPP, the case on fake ARV has been filed and it is being dealt with accordingly in order to get an insight on who is being accused of what before the relevant authorities undertake thorough investigation. According to the DPP's office, the normal time for handling various cases is 14 days but the issue of fake ARVs has taken long time (over three months) due to the sensitivity and the nature of the case itself.

While legal procedures are ongoing, we suggest that the government should provide official information to the public about the counterfeit drugs (4, 000 bottles), which are not yet recalled. Are they at health facilities or have they already been given to patients? If the ARVs were taken by patients, does the government have any information on the patients who used the said drugs? Are there any side effects that may affect them through the use of these drugs?

By providing accurate information, the government will clear doubts to PLHIV and citizens at large and build up their confidence that they can continue using the medications without harming their health. Sikika believes that, the presence of quality medicines will increase confidence and trust in the PLHIV community to continue using ARVs to continue to improve their health.

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