

# Varsity updates

## UoN Embarks on HIV/Aids Control Programme

When he said that HIV/Aids was a national disaster, the audience was not ruffled any bit. Then the chairman of the National Aids Control Council (NACC), Dr. Mohamed S. Abdallah tried statistics; 500 Kenyans are dying every day as a result of the virus. Again, the young student audience did not stir. It did not matter that he tried imagery; that in a year, it would take 25 Moi International Sports Centre-sized stadiums to accommodate the dead. Somehow that also did not sink in - the imagery was too distant, too mystified.

Something had to give, to capture the imagination of such a creative group of young intellectuals. But to talk of a national disaster wouldn't - it is a cliché that has done the rounds in describing drought, crime, political clashes, and power and water shortages. It has lost meaning to many Kenyans whose life is a disaster itself. It is no wonder that despite awareness, so many Kenyan are still dying of AIDS.

That Dr. Abdallah's statistical dead could not fire the imagination of students was not surprising. Students, like the rest of us, have come to terms with an increasingly violent society. The lynching in the village, market and city streets are grim reminders of just how violence has become Kenyans' method of choice in resolving conflict. The media laps such images with glee and splashes them on our television screens at prime time - family dinnertime - so that we all share in our violent harvest.

But the truth is that HIV/aids kills more people in Africa than does other conflicts. This single scourge has killed one million Kenyans. By virtue of a 1998 estimate, about 2 million Kenyans are infected with HIV. There are over one million Aids orphans strung throughout the country - they are an insecurity time bomb.

Many are aware of the danger of the HIV AIDS, the problem is that they have not changed their behaviour. The majority infected, dying and dead are those in their prime - the youth, the student; the most precious investment - the one for whom life ends before it really begins.

Kenya needs Kshs.7 billion every year to fight the disease, so that we may have to forego investment in education, infrastructure and welfare to win this war. Already the scourge is reversing 40 years of development gains, reducing life expectancy to 45 years. Productivity has plummeted. We are now borrowing not so much to prevent the disease but to fight it.

It was time for Dr. Abdallah to plunge the needle where it hurt most. He made it personal: "We might be forced to close universities for some time so that we can look after those of you who are sick". The students mumbled, tried protest. They were awake now. Something had given in finally. "How many of you are HIV-positive?" Silence. He had them finally, had their attention - "Do you know that 15 per cent of all of you will not see your first salary? What a wasted life!" But he

left it to their Vice-Chancellor to make the home run.

And Prof. Francis Gichaga talked to the attentive audience that hot July mid morning; he said before HIV/Aids became a problem at the University, problems were related to student pregnancies and STDs. About 30 per cent of the female students got pregnant in the first academic year. STDs were prevalent among the male students due to their "collecting" habits but were managed by an efficient health service system.

Incidence of HIV/Aids prevalence among student were recorded in a 1991 Senate Special Committee that studied students' health problems. At that time it was not easy to put a percentage of prevalence given the stigmatisation. Many students, and indeed the society as a whole, had not come to terms with the reality of HIV/Aids. Worse, the Aids scourge emerged when university funding by the exchequer was decreasing, thus compounding the capacity of the university to institute a campaign.

Prof. Gichaga told the attentive audience at the University Students Aids Control Association (USACA)-organised "HIV/Aids and Students Workshop" on main Campus that he could not afford to loose two of them each week any more. That HIV/Aids was exacting a strenuous toll on the capacity of the University of Nairobi. It was grim.

"You are the disease, victims, and the medicine, cure: you are, so to

please cont. page 23



## UoN Embarks on HIV/Aids Control Programme

cont. from page 22

speak, the defendant, the prosecutor, judge and executioner in your own case. So let's do something about it!" implored Prof. Gichaga.

And sure enough, the first student initiative on HIV/Aids at University of Nairobi is about to produce far-reaching results.

The university has embarked on a Student and Staff Strategic Plan to Combat Aids (SSSPCA). The mobilisation Plan was mooted out of the recommendations made by the students at the Workshop. Among others, the Workshop recommended that the University draw up an overall HIV/Aids Control Strategy that will include an institutional framework and structure, peer education and training of trainers. It is expected that there will be student, staff, and community outreach programmes. Already volunteers for student peer training have been registered.

It is envisaged that once all the logistics are in place at the University of Nairobi, the effort will act as the focal institutional structure that will loop in the six public universities to form a secretariat for the universities' HIV/Aids control programme. Dr. Abdallah had floated this recommendation in his Keynote Address. He had promised that the NACC would fund the HIV/Aids project at the University. The rider was, however, that the University work on a plan of action with a realistic budget, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

As a followup to the seminar in October, a former Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Joseph Mungai gave a pep talk to the University Senate on the University and HIV/Aids. The proposal for the SSSPCA was overwhelmingly endorsed as long overdue.

But this is not to say that nothing has been on-going. The Department of Human Anatomy where Prof. Mungai works has integrated a course in HIV/Aids into its syllabus. It is part of a comprehensive blue - print programme that will see departments integrate courses on HIV/Aids.

The course started as part of a general talk to First Year students in 1999. Encouraged by what they learnt from the class talks, students volunteered to give talks in schools, churches and communities during vacations. Student interest and community response in-turn encouraged the department to convert the talks into a peer education course. "Ours is not awareness creation. It is HIV/Aids education", Prof. Mungai deadpanned about the course objective.

He said integrated HIV/Aids courses should be the University's response as an emergency action to the national disaster. He said three disaster points have been identified: One, First year student are a disaster point because of their vulnerability to campus life freedom. Two, Form One students in high school are a disaster point because of their

ignorance. Three, standard 3 to 4 pupils who at 8 to 10 years are a disaster because parental and society silence over sexuality internalises irresponsibility in later life.

Prof. Mungai revealed that the peer education course benefited first year students who in turn fanned out in the country to educate those in secondary and primary levels.

### Academic Programmes offered at UoN

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Bachelor of Architecture  
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B.A. (Land Economics)  
B.A. (Design)  
B.A. (Anthropology)  
Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.)  
B.Sc. (Computer Science)  
B.Sc. (Civil Engineering)  
B.Sc. (Electrical Engineering)  
B.Sc. (Mechanical Engineering)  
B.Sc. (Surveying)  
B.Sc. (Actuarial Science)  
B.Sc. (Biology)  
B.Sc. (Mathematics)  
B.Sc. (Statistics)  
B.Sc. (Agricultural Engineering)  
B.Sc. (Agricultural)  
B.Sc. (Food Science & Technology)  
B.Sc. (Range Management)  
Bachelor of Dental Surgery  
Bachelor of Pharmacy  
Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine  
Bachelor of Medicine (M.B. Ch. B.)  
Bachelor of Science (Nursing)  
Bachelor of Commerce  
Bachelor of Laws (LL.B)  
Bachelor of Education (Arts)  
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