



2015 TARGET

BARBADOS
LOOKING TO
SLASH HIV/AIDS
CASES BY A
QUARTER OVER
THE NEXT
TWO YEARS

by Emmanuel Joseph

Barbados is on track to wiping out HIV/AIDS cases by 25 per cent by 2015. Senior Medical Officer of Health in charge of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, Dr Anton Best, assured **Barbados TODAY** this afternoon that with the annual incidence of new infections and deaths starting to plummet, this country was well underway to achieving the goal for such a significant decline.

Best said pilot studies were yet to be carried out to determine the stage at which the reduction currently stood. However, he said this country had already met the **UN Millennium Development Goal** of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015.

"The UNAIDS goal for zero new infections by 2015 is a vision. It is achievable in one sense, perhaps not in a very short timeframe, but it is a vision the countries of the UN have bought into," pointed out the senior medical officer. "We," he added, "are striving towards zero new infections in a number of ways. First, to scale up the access to HIV testing and counselling services. That is something we are certainly doing here in Barbados.

"Once we diagnose people who are infected with HIV, we try to get them in care; we try to keep them in care; we try to put them on antiretroviral therapy."

Best suggested, too, that an AIDS-free generation was possible.

"Because children are not being born with HIV any more [in Barbados]. Once we diagnose women who are pregnant with HIV, we can put them on antiretroviral therapy. This reduces the likelihood that they will pass the HIV infection onto their children. Because of this very aggressive intervention that we had in place since 1995, we have not had a case of HIV being transmitted from a mother to child since 2007."

The Government health official supplied **Barbados TODAY** with the latest data showing that since the rapid increase in newly diagnosed HIV cases, AIDS and deaths during the 1980s and 1990s, there had been a downward slide in the same categories thereafter. The statistics revealed that the annual deaths among people living with HIV moved from 50 per cent of that population

when the first case was reported in 1984 to two percent in 2010.

Best gave even more recent information on the current state of affairs.

"The last published report was for 2010, but we do have data for 2011 and 2012. I am not at liberty to share those data, suffice to say that the estimated prevalence of HIV at the end of 2012 was 1.2 per cent. So 1.2 per cent of persons in the general population is positive for HIV. However, we believe there are sub-populations of marginalized

persons in which the prevalence of HIV is higher," announced the Senior Medical Officer of Health.

"Since the expanded response in 2002, and the expanded response entailed universal access to antiretroviral therapy, we had a notable decrease in morbidity, the number of people getting sick from HIV, the number of people acquiring AIDS who were HIV positive and the number of deaths associated with HIV. So those trends have continued," the Government officer pointed out.

GIRLS ON FIRE

It was billed as an adult play. And last weekend's staging of *Girls On Fire* at the Major Noott Hall at Combermere School last weekend certainly lived up to its R rating, while tackling the problem of HIV/AIDS in Barbados in a real way. Here, "low-end prostitutes" Peaches and CiCi encounter "high-end escorts" Shanice and Rasheeda in a dramatic scene addressing stigma and discrimination.



"What we have noticed over the past couple of years, that the number of new HIV cases has started to decline. At first, we were not sure how to interpret the data that we were finding. But now, since we have done special studies, such as one that was published earlier this year by Professor Clive Landis, we now know, with a pretty high level of certainty, that the antiretroviral drug is the cause of the reduction in the incidence of HIV," asserted Best.

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