

A Voice for Change: Ugandan Health Professionals United for Action on AIDS

“We (health professionals) have the knowledge but we have been silent. This was long overdue – a wonderful opportunity to share ideas about advocacy for HIV/AIDS. This was the first forum in the health sector ever touching this sensitive area.”

-Counselor, STD/AIDS Control Program, Ministry of Health

AFRICAN HEALTH PROFESSIONALS & AIDS ACTIVISM: A POWERFUL CONSTITUENCY FINDS ITS VOICE

Despite the unprecedented scope of the AIDS epidemic, decision-makers have continued to follow old paths to policy formulation, planning for instead of working with important stakeholders like patients and health providers. The AIDS pandemic presents an important opportunity for medical, nursing and public health leaders to use their powerful voice to tell the world, in the words of United Nations Special Envoy to AIDS in Africa Stephen Lewis, *“that an apocalypse has unfolded, and it has to be stopped in its tracks before it engulfs us all.”*

Health professionals from countries highly affected by HIV/AIDS can provide strong national and international leadership to confront the AIDS epidemic and promote sound AIDS prevention, treatment and care policy. In countries where civil society is just beginning to find its voice, health professionals represent a strong constituency, which, if unified, can have a significant impact on forming policy and monitoring promises on AIDS relief.

The need for the health professional voice has never been so great. With extraordinary resources being dedicated to AIDS in Africa—and even more money and coordination required to stem the tide—government and donors must look to the expertise of health professionals to fight the scourge. In addition to their direct involvement and expertise in clinical care, African health professionals and their respective institutions have enormous power to contribute to the fight against AIDS. They can:

1. **Educate** the public & policy makers about AIDS.
2. **Provide leadership** within their own community and civil society to support AIDS programs.
3. **Be critical resources to policy makers and donors** to assure that decisions about resource commitments and the programs and policies that accompany them reflect the best knowledge of medicine, nursing and public health.
4. **Offer support to colleagues** in other countries burdened by the pandemic.

BUILDING A NETWORK OF UGANDAN HEALTH PROFESSIONALS DEDICATED TO AIDS ADVOCACY

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) and the Action Group for Health, Human Rights and HIV/AIDS Uganda (AGHA) are collaborating to engage Ugandan health professionals in an AIDS advocacy network so that the powerful voice of health professionals can be heard by decision makers nationally and internationally. The goals of this network are to ensure the expertise and needs of health professionals are reflected in AIDS policy, to monitor set goals to confirm the country is on track, and to help strengthen civil society to become more involved in health, governance and HIV/AIDS policy.

Both AGHA and PHR have extensive experience mobilizing health professionals to advocate for change. PHR has worked with health professionals for over 20 years to advance the health and dignity of all people through respect for, protection of and fulfillment of human rights. PHR draws on its core staff, an extensive network of internationally recognized advisers, and its membership of physicians, nurses, public health experts, forensic scientists, and human rights experts to accomplish its work. Over the years, major campaign and research projects have focused on war crimes, refugee health and sexual violence. In 1997 PHR shared in the Nobel Prize for Peace as part of the Steering Committee of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Since 2002, PHR has run the Health Action AIDS Campaign, which is uniting leading health experts to advocate for best practices and increased funding for AIDS.

AGHA's mission is to raise the awareness of all health care providers and the communities they serve in Uganda about link between health and human rights, with a particular emphasis on HIV/AIDS. AGHA brings together doctors, nurses and other scholars and professionals interested in promoting human rights and health. The organization has four major areas of focus: educating health providers and communities on health and human rights; advocating for health, human rights and strong AIDS policy; researching health and human rights issues; and networking with other health and human rights organizations for comprehensive, coordinated service.

Through this collaboration, PHR and AGHA have mobilized over 300 Ugandan health professionals, from rural and urban areas and from diverse sectors and disciplines, using an innovative model for engagement that combines consultations, training, and outreach to unite and mobilize health providers. This model gives health professionals a unique opportunity to gain concrete advocacy and human rights skills, work together to identify key AIDS challenges, and create action plans to meet these challenges. Issues addressed in trainings and workshops include:

1. Challenges health professionals face.
2. Role of and potential barriers to health professionals in advocating for comprehensive HIV/AIDS programming, policy and funding.
3. Mobilization of health professionals on public policy matters.
4. Forging relationships between diverse health professionals.
5. Overcoming stigma, including within the health professions.
6. Protecting and promoting human rights.

7. Medical/nursing education programs to address these issues.
8. Working with other key sectors like AIDS activists, People Living with AIDS (PLWA), consumer groups, and religious and community leaders.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS: A MODEL FOR ENGAGEMENT

Initial Consultation and Outreach: AGHA and PHR have reached out to diverse health professionals from all disciplines and sectors to confirm the network's core agenda and engage new partners. Nurses, doctors, medical students, laboratory technicians, pharmacists, traditional healers, counselors, midwives, hospital administrators and many others, from the public, private and non-profit sectors, have all come together in this groundbreaking effort. PHR and AGHA began by consulting with a wide array of important stakeholders, including professional associations, human rights and medical NGOs, leading AIDS researchers and clinicians, and government clinics, to find out their most pressing concerns about AIDS and what they wanted to learn about human rights and advocacy. These consultations, held in Kampala and five rural districts, confirmed the core agenda for the nascent network and engaged new partners in AIDS advocacy.

Health, Human Rights and HIV/AIDS Advocacy Workshops: AGHA and PHR are holding a series of workshops across Uganda that feature human rights and AIDS advocacy training, presentations by PLWAs, and participatory exercises which allow participants to discuss AIDS challenges and how to make their voices heard in policy circles. Workshops have been held in Kampala, Mbarara and Tororo, and more will be held throughout 2005. PHR and AGHA are also looking to connect to existing CME and other training programs so that human rights and advocacy become a more integrated part of Ugandan health professional education.

2-Day AIDS Advocacy Conference: "Taking Action for Change: Health Professionals United for HIV/AIDS Advocacy" This conference, held in December 2004, brought together over 120 health professionals from Uganda and the US to talk about AIDS advocacy, to share experiences and ideas, and take action to stop the scourge. The conference allowed participants to delve deeply in seven major AIDS challenges identified during past workshops, and do advocacy planning and skills building around this platform. The challenges are assuring equitable and sustainable access to ARVs, building public sector health infrastructure as part of a holistic AIDS plan, improving human resource capacity across the country, ending stigma and discrimination, protecting vulnerable populations—including women and IDPs, expanding prevention programs and addressing funding and budget mechanisms which limit spending on health.

Conference attendees also participated in advocacy and human rights skill building sessions, CME sessions, and listened to speeches by leading AIDS health workers and PLWA. The conference featured a forum which brought together health professionals with leading Ugandan and international decision makers to discuss AIDS, build relationships, and to start to make inroads towards collaboration and change.

Advocacy Platform and Actions: Through conversations, consultations and group exercises, the network has defined a strong advocacy platform from which to take action against AIDS. The network released one advocacy letter in December 2003, sent a series of recommendations to the US Ambassador to Uganda on the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in October 2004, and is working on other actions to utilize the collective voice of Ugandan health professionals to fight the epidemic. The December statement, addressed to US Secretary of Health and Human Services and Chair of the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis Tommy Thompson and Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, called on world leaders to accelerate AIDS service delivery and overcome bureaucratic delays which are costing lives. PHR and AGHA have also sent a detailed policy brief to the US Ambassador to Uganda outlining six areas of intervention on which we feel PEPFAR Uganda should focus more resources. Other actions may focus on speeding generic drugs to Uganda, setting goals for equitable ARV access, smoothing health sector funding mechanisms and/or fighting stigma in clinics and communities.

Continued Outreach and Communication: AGHA and PHR continue to reach out to professional organizations, institutions and practitioners to learn more about their concerns, connect them with other health professionals and encourage them to see themselves as advocates for real change in Uganda. Members are connected via email and post mail and have a webpage on the PHR website (www.phrusa.org) where they can contact each other and find more information on upcoming events and actions.

Conclusion and Contacts:

Health professionals have incredible potential to influence debate, improve policy and strengthen civil society. PHR and AGHA believe this AIDS advocacy network can change the course of AIDS in Uganda. For more information on joining this network, or how you can form a network in your own country, contact AGHA at aghauganda@yahoo.com or PHR at phrusa@phrusa.org.