



Press statement

UNITED NATIONS CONDEMNS IRRESPONSIBLE ATTACK ON ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY

Geneva, 30 March 2005 -- A recent advertising campaign is touting the benefits of vitamin therapy above antiretroviral therapy and claiming that antiretroviral therapy is toxic. These advertisements are wrong and misleading, said the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) today.

WHO, UNICEF and UNAIDS have condemned the irresponsible linking of their names to claims that vitamins and nutrition therapy alone can prevent AIDS deaths.

A number of accounts published by Matthias Rath on his website and distributed as flyers and advertisements within South Africa state that a number of United Nations bodies including WHO, UNICEF and UNAIDS endorse his approach. The three UN organizations are extremely concerned about these misrepresentations and note that the Rath Foundation uses quotes and information from UN agencies out of context. Misrepresentation of this sort is both dangerous and unhelpful.

Over the last few years, several studies have been carried out to investigate the role of micronutrient supplements on the course of HIV/AIDS disease. The results of these studies have not been conclusive. WHO and UNAIDS recommendations for micronutrient supplementation are therefore similar for all people whether they are infected with HIV or not.

As in the population at large, a good diet that provides the full range of essential micronutrients is important to the health of people infected with HIV and can help bolster the immune system, boost energy levels and maintain body weight and well-being. Guidelines published jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WHO in 2003 offer simple dietary suggestions for people living with HIV and AIDS¹.

Although they may help to meet increased nutritional requirements, nutritional supplements cannot replace eating a balanced and healthy diet. Whether a person is infected with HIV or not, WHO and UNAIDS recommend a good mixed diet, whenever possible, rather than dietary supplements. For people on antiretroviral therapy, good nutrition and clean water help treatment work more effectively.

Vitamins and nutritional supplements alone can not take the place of comprehensive treatment and care for people living with HIV/AIDS, including prophylaxis and treatment for opportunistic infections and antiretroviral therapy, where indicated, as well as a good, balanced diet. Antiretroviral therapy has been shown in numerous studies to reduce the replication of HIV in the body, reduce the incidence of opportunistic infections and AIDS-related illness and improve quality of life. In countries where it is widely available, antiretroviral therapy has turned AIDS from a 'death sentence' into a chronic but manageable disease. As with any other drugs, antiretroviral treatments do have side effects that have been documented in clinical trials.

¹ Living well with HIV/AIDS: A manual on nutritional care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS, World Health Organization / Food and Agriculture Organization, 2002

The role of nutrition for people living with HIV/AIDS will be highlighted at an upcoming meeting being convened by WHO in collaboration with other UN agencies. The Consultation on Nutrition and HIV/AIDS in Africa will take place in Durban, South Africa from April 10 - 13, 2005. The goal of the consultation is to develop feasible, evidence-based strategies that will help improve the health status of HIV-infected people in southern and east African countries.

Editors note: A fact sheet entitled 'AIDS treatment, nutrition and food supplements' is available on the internet at www.who.int/3by5/mediacentre/fsFood/en/

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