

# South Africa's health minister says of AIDS sufferers: Let them eat garlic

Our correspondent  
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On February 9 the South African Minister of Health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang denied that she gave any commitment to the commencement of a national anti-retroviral rollout. Precisely such an HIV-AIDS plan, including the provision of anti-retroviral drugs, was announced in November 2003.

Tshabalala-Msimang's denial came soon after President Thabo Mbeki stated in an interview on SABC television that the government was not going to change its stance on AIDS. In response to interviewer John Perlman's question as to why, in six opening addresses to parliament, he has never spoken about AIDS "with a sense of compassion or a sense of identification with those suffering from the disease," an irritated Mbeki stated that "[t]here are many, many things that impact on the health of our people. Why is it that nobody wants the president to speak about that?" He maintained that he could not understand why there was so much emphasis on HIV and AIDS.

The initial sign that the South African government is not committed to providing anti-retroviral drugs to AIDS sufferers was the slashing of the budget for this year's rollout from R270 million to R90 million. There has been a lengthy delay in the procurement of drugs, with chief director of pharmacy services, Humphrey Zokufa, saying that there was "no hurry" to do this.

Tshabalala-Msimang denied saying that there would be 54 sites dispensing anti-retrovirals "as soon as the program started". She then stated that "when we have put everything in place, we will announce the day we are ready, and kick off. From that day, within a year, 54 districts will be operational."

Tshabalala-Msimang also denied that health authorities promised that 54,000 people would be on therapy by the end of this month, cynically stating "we were very careful in crafting our statement. We said 'as

soon as the program is operational'".

The health minister then went on to recommend that those infected with HIV eat garlic, lemons and olive oil. "Garlic is absolutely critical, we need to do research on it. We cannot just ridicule it."

Mark Heywood of the Treatment Action Campaign expressed his concerns about the singular lack of progress in implementing the rollout: "We believe that the health system is in a state of serious decay, and is not meeting government's constitutional obligation to provide quality healthcare to as many people as possible.... We are not convinced that the epidemic is levelling off or reaching a plateau. We are not convinced that rates of infection are decreasing among young people."



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