

Renewed partnership aims to integrate Phidisa into SAMHS

By Itumeleng Makhubela

Attendees of the Project Phidisa annual conference took time to reflect on progress made and to reach consensus on the new Research Agenda applicable to South Africa. The Memorandum of Understanding, which lapsed in 2010, has since been renewed for the next five years and for which three goals were identified. The goals are intended to integrate Phidisa more effectively into the South African Military Health Service (SAMHS) as a clinical infectious disease research component, build capacity for sustainable clinical research and develop a new research agenda.

Project Phidisa is a collaboration project led by the SANDF and other partners, including the National Institute of Health of the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Department of Defense. It is a clinical research project that aims to establish the impact of HIV infection on the South African military community and develop strategies for the effective management and prevention of HIV infection.

The project is intended to support a clinical research infrastructure within the SANDF and a network of sickbays and hospitals for studies on pathogenesis, prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS, and possibly other infectious diseases. It is also intended to help establish a biomedical and public health research capability within the SAMHS that can be utilised in future to address other health issues of critical importance for military force preparedness.

The research will include collecting information through a research study in human volunteers to answer specific health questions. Clinical researches are carefully conducted in the safest way to find treatments that can work in people and to learn about ways to improve health using voluntary participants.

The Second-in-Command of Project Phidisa, Dr Lotty Ledwaba, spoke about the history of the project and what it has been able to achieve during the conference on 29 November 2011. When it all started in late 2002, it was meant to expand the *Masibambisane* prevention collaboration to include research. Between the period January 2004 and October 2004 the first participants were enrolled and screened in different Phidisa sites around the country.

By December 2004 a follow-up meeting was scheduled in Pretoria to review the progress of the project and to address deficiencies noted. This led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Research Agreement between the former Minister of Defence and the United States Ambassador to South Africa.

At the end of April 2011 a letter of intent to continue beyond the Memorandum of

Understanding was signed by both governments and officially extended for another five years to renew collaboration on health projects for SAMHS members..

Dr Motsoaledi said: "AIDS is a powerful enemy facing armed forces internationally - and our Armed Forces are not immune. While there is no cure for HIV, we now know that the disease can be retarded successfully through treatment that slows down its manifestations. Through anti-retrovirals we can reduce deaths and new infections from HIV and AIDS, but these drugs are expensive and not readily available.

"The prevalence of military contingency operations such as humanitarian, peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions in the last few decades have exposed the military establishment to unexpected risks and challenges. One of these challenges is the risk to peacekeeping through the spread of HIV infections. Military personnel are considered to be a high-risk group concerning both infection and transmission."

The Minister of Health said that the armed forces undertook peacekeeping responsibilities in distant places far away from their families, but their natural impulses remained with them, leading to changes in the pattern of health. While peace operations are meant to protect human beings from threats, HIV targets them through the decline in security.

He warned that if the spread of HIV and AIDS was ignored, it could adversely affect power projection and the ability of the armed forces to protect the sovereignty of the country and maintain civil order, which would lead to the loss of more soldiers to AIDS than fighting the enemy in a conventional battle.

Dr Motsoaledi noted the numbers of military personnel and their dependants whose lives were prolonged through their participation in Phidisa. He mentioned how proud he was that some of the research findings of the project had appeared in the pages of international health research journals.

The Minister of Health said: "I have no doubt that lessons and data from Project Phidisa will inform the South African National Defence Force's (SANDF) policies and future decisions about how best to manage the HIV and AIDS epidemic in the military. Project Phidisa will also inform the SANDF on its combat readiness by expanding knowledge regarding the best way to treat infection with HIV."