

S. Africa to provide ARV treatment to all pregnant HIV positive women - Zuma

CAPE TOWN

ALL pregnant HIV positive women will be able to access lifelong anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs, beginning from January next year, South African President Jacob Zuma said on Saturday.

All others living with HIV will be eligible for treatment at CD4 count 500, Zuma said at an event marking the country's Women's Day in the eastern port city of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province. Currently HIV patients in the country obtain treatment at CD4 count 350.

CD4 refers to cells that send signals to activate one's body immune response when they detect "intruders," like viruses or bacteria.

Once transmitted HIV attacks the T-cells and replicates the virus, it would make it impossible for the immune system to protect the body from infection and illness. Public hospitals dispense ARVs when HIV deteriorates to AIDS and patients' CD4 or T-cell counts are below 200.

Zuma said many people living with HIV live healthy and productive lives which has increased life expectancy to 60 in South Africa in only a few years.

South Africa has made the highest domestic investment in AIDS among all low-income and middle-income countries. It alone invested 1.9

billion U.S dollars in 2011 from public sources, resulting in a five-fold increase between 2006 and 2011.

HIV/AIDS is South Africa's prominent health concern and the country has increased its scale of HIV treatment by 75 percent, allowing almost two million people to have access to the life-saving treatment.

In addition, the number of AIDS deaths in South Africa had decreased by nearly 30 percent in South Africa since 2004, said a UN report.

The death toll was down from 330,000 in 2004 to 240,000 in 2012, according to the report released by the Joint UN Program on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) early this year.

To further improve the health of women during and immediately after pregnancy, later this month the Ministry of Health will launch the innovative "Mom Connect" program, according to Zuma

Through this service, pregnant women will receive health messages on their cellular phones advising them on how to ensure the health of the baby.

Zuma said he has directed the Department of Women to be ready to launch the first report on the status of women in the country in August next year.