What does Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) mean in your life? This was a question posed to a Grade 10 learner by a teacher this year. How would you and I have answered? Our obligations go far beyond merely handing medicines over a counter to a patient.

And if you were asked “What’s your responsibility? How will YOU prevent human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and tuberculosis (TB) infections?” what would your answer be?

In March 2017, the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) Chairperson, Cyril Ramaphosa, launched South Africa’s National Strategic Plan for HIV, TB and STIs 2017 - 2022 (NSP). The NSP serves as a roadmap for the next stage of the country’s journey towards a future where these diseases are no longer public health challenges. In particular, the intention is to accelerate prevention to reduce new infections in these diseases.

World AIDS Day 1 December 2017

So, in the light of that, what does World AIDS Day mean in your life? World AIDS Day is observed around the world on 1 December every year, but it is marked in different ways around the world. In America, for example, the theme is “Increasing impact through transparency, accountability, and partnerships”.

It’s important to remember that the intention of World AIDS Day is to raise awareness of AIDS, but it is also to show support for those people living with HIV and to remember the people who have lost their lives to HIV. In particular, it is to remind everyone of the facts around HIV and AIDS.

South African theme and slogan for World AIDS Day

Our theme for World AIDS Day 2017 is “I have the right to know, prevention is my responsibility”. As healthcare professionals, we are all asked to take this message to the people with whom we come into contact, whether they are friends, family or patients.

The slogan for 2017 is “Let our actions count”. It’s an important slogan – words alone are inconsequential. We need actions to produce the results that are desperately needed.

Perhaps our theme and slogan and the American theme are actually very similar – transparency, accountability and partnerships. The entire world will benefit if we achieve these goals.

Progress in HIV and AIDS treatment

There has been so much progress in treating HIV and AIDS, which is why it is now a chronic disease like many others, and with the same good prognosis. To a large extent, this was brought about by activism of people who knew that there had to be a way to manage the disease.

National AIDS Trust UK

The National AIDS Trust (NAT) in the United Kingdom is an HIV policy and campaigning charity. The NAT has a simple yet profound campaign for 2017. They say, “You helped us fight HIV. Now let’s end it – end isolation, end stigma, end HIV transmission”.

Lorraine Osman
What is life like with HIV?

NAT begins by pointing out that nowadays, provided it is diagnosed early, and if taking effective medication, people living with HIV can now live as long as anyone else and will be unlikely to ever develop AIDS. The immune system stays strong because the antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) reduce the amount of virus in the body. Because ARVs stop the virus from replicating, the levels of the virus are so low that it cannot be passed on to someone else.

People living with HIV can do just about any job that they choose to do. They can now have healthy babies. They can live long, healthy and happy lives. And all of this is because that is the result of taking effective medicines.

The major problem that people living with HIV face is that, despite all the efforts to educate people about the facts, they are met with stigma and discrimination in everyday life.

Let’s end isolation

In South Africa, infected children were separated from other children just in case they fell on the playground, bled and then infected the other children. Communities sometimes cast HIV infected people out.

Let’s end stigma and discrimination

Unfortunately, despite all the efforts to educate people, many still treat people with HIV differently from other people. Somehow, people still believe that you can get HIV from kissing or hugging someone who is HIV positive, or from toilet seats or sneezes and coughs.

The result of this is that many people choose to remain silent about their status. As healthcare professionals, we need to be particularly sensitive to this. While the right to confidentiality applies to all patients, revealing someone’s HIV status may be very distressing to the patient.

Let’s end HIV transmission

Although we have made huge strides in preventing HIV transmission, there is still so much more we can do. The SANAC campaign message is clear: “Prevention is my responsibility.” As a healthcare professional, we take responsibility not only for our own health but for the health of the people that we serve.

People at risk need to know how they can avoid being infected by HIV. For years, the ABC strategy of HIV prevention was used – abstain until marriage, be faithful to one partner, use a condom to prevent transmission during sex. It worked to a point, particularly in Uganda, but was not enough to give guidance during all situations.

Considerable progress has been made in slowing down mother-to-child transmission through ARV use. The use of ARVs for post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and, more recently, pre-exposure prophylaxis, PrEP, has been shown to be safe and effective. The problem is – do people who are at risk know about either? Do they know who to ask?

There is also a misconception that PrEP can replace abstinence, being faithful and condom use. PrEP is primarily intended to assist vulnerable people who are at high risk, e.g. someone who has an HIV infected partner, people who share needles when injecting drugs, and sex workers. It is not necessarily an easy option, however – it requires daily medicine use, regular repeat HIV tests, and regular repeat prescriptions.
As healthcare professionals, it is up to us to make sure that consumers know of, and understand, exactly what kind of help is available. In that way, we’ll be able to help end HIV in our communities.

**Useful websites**
1. https://www.hiv.gov/events/awareness-days/world-aids-day
3. https://www.worldaidsday.org/campaign/lets-end-it