

Spare a thought for HIV/AIDS victims today and beyond

All things considered, the health authorities here, we believe, are doing a good job combating the spread of HIV/AIDS.

We say that, bearing in mind the financial constraints that have forced our health sector to function with limited and, in some cases, less than desirable resources.

But even with that handicap, we must commend the effort being made by the State, particularly in relation to the availability of drugs to treat the deadly AIDS virus.

Data from the health ministry show that in 2007 a total of 1,104 persons with advanced HIV (595 males and 509 females) were reported, compared with 1,186 in 2006.

Of the 1,104 cases, 781 persons were diagnosed with AIDS, compared with 1,112 persons in 2004, a 30 per cent decline which, the ministry said, was largely due to increased access to treatment.

The ministry informs us, too, that the number of AIDS deaths has also decreased, with 320 (201 males and 119 females) reported in 2007, against 514 in 2005.

“A decrease in AIDS deaths and cases is attributed to the introduction of public access to antiretroviral treatment in 2004, prophylaxis against opportunistic infections and improved laboratory capacity to conduct investigations such as CD4 counts, viral load and PCRs. These factors have resulted in a general improved quality of care,” the ministry says on its website.

We take some level of comfort in that, but we are still pained by the fact that too many Jamaicans are infected by this virus — well over 12,500 since January 1982 when the first case was reported here. Equally painful is the knowledge that more than half of those reported cases have ended in death.

It is with that heart-rending reality in mind that we encourage full support of the National HIV/AIDS/STI Control Programme’s push to improve attitudes and behaviours towards persons living with HIV and AIDS.

For even as we acknowledge that there are now more people who are willing to care for family members afflicted with HIV/AIDS, the harsh reality is that there remains a great deal of stigma associated with the disease. And until people are sufficiently informed about how it is transmitted, we will continue to face difficulty convincing relatives and friends of HIV/AIDS victims that they face no risk in caring for those who are infected.

In fact, it is our hope that by adopting better attitudes and behaviours towards people living with HIV and AIDS, more and more Jamaicans — armed with the knowledge of its effects on people’s health and on families — will engage in behaviour that is sexually responsible.

Again, we encourage all Jamaicans to endorse the theme of this year’s observation of World AIDS Day being commemorated today — “Yes I can support someone living with HIV and AIDS”.

And as the health minister, Mr Rudyard Spencer, correctly said in his message to mark the day: “All you need to do is help them access their basic right by treating them as you would wish to be treated.”