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Dallas-area residents doing their part to help Africa's AIDS fight



Eric Risberg/The Associated Press

Carlin Holden places a red ribbon beside "The Falls" which were recently restored at the National AIDS Memorial Grove on World AIDS Day in San Francisco.

By JIM LANDERS

Washington Bureau

jlanders@dallasnews.com

Published: 01 December 2011 06:40 PM

Thursday's optimistic tone for World AIDS Day — "The Beginning of the End" — seems a bit remote to some local folks working to combat the disease in rural South Africa.

Dallas designer Trisha Wilson and UT Southwestern Medical Center have worked together since 2006 fighting AIDS, tuberculosis and other diseases among tens of thousands of impoverished people living in a corner of South Africa that contains the Waterberg Mountains.

They're making progress. Six years ago, only a few hundred people with the AIDS virus were receiving anti-retroviral medications. Now more than 1,500 are on the drugs. Mother-to-child transmission of the virus that causes AIDS has dropped with new maternity care.

About 60 trained and paid local workers visit people in the area to check if they're ill, if they're taking their medications or if they're out of sorts from something a traditional healer recommended.

"The ability to scale up and address the problem has been incredible, but clearly the problem is huge," said Dr. Tess Barton, the UT Southwestern assistant professor of pediatrics who is overseeing the school's fellowship program for doctors working at the Waterberg Welfare Society.

"We now have sufficient knowledge and science and treatment opportunities that we could eliminate HIV in the next 20 to 30 years. It would be actually physically possible," Barton said. "But I think it's completely unlikely that anybody is going to apply the resources or use the science in a fashion to realistically achieve that."

Barton has struggled to recruit local doctors willing to spend several months working in South Africa. Those who have gone come back enthusiastic about the work, but appalled by the challenges posed by traditional healers, manpower shortages and poor public awareness.

Growing support

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In 2003, President George W. Bush launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. The number of sub-Saharan Africans receiving anti-retroviral drugs has since climbed from 50,000 to 5 million, with 4 million of those directly funded by the PEPFAR program.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Clinton Foundation and others have made available billions of dollars to deal with HIV, AIDS and tuberculosis in Africa.

"There is nothing more effective than PEPFAR," Bush said Thursday in Tanzania. "The number of people living today because of PEPFAR is staggering."

But the difficulties faced by the Waterberg Welfare Society in dealing with AIDS are familiar across sub-Saharan Africa, global health experts say. Foremost among these is a shortage of health care workers.

Wilson came across the Waterberg Welfare Society not long after she bought a ranch in the area in 2003. She was dismayed by the lack of medical care and education for poor blacks living in the area.

"I don't know how anybody can drive down those dirt roads and not be affected by what they see on the side of the road," she said. "I couldn't not do something."

Peter Farrant, a doctor with a farm outside the town of Vaalwater, had started the welfare society in 2000 with the help of another local resident, Mary Stephenson. They wanted to offer health care to the 25,000 blacks living in Leseding Township, on the outskirts of Vaalwater (also called Maballane) in South Africa's Limpopo province.

Wilson started the Wilson Foundation and helped Farrant build a clinic, a hospice, a school and a community center. Together, they persuaded UT Southwestern Medical Center to support a fellowship for Texas physicians willing to spend three or more months helping out.

"It does take a special kind of doctor to be willing to go if you've never worked in a foreign country," Barton said. "It's a little anxiety-provoking. But everybody who's been has had a good experience."

Clear challenges

Recent UT Southwestern graduate Dr. Kathy Kordy returned from a summer fellowship in Vaalwater in October. During her three-month stint at the welfare society, a major focus was on moving HIV patients to a government clinic down the road for their drug treatments.

"They're understaffed, overwhelmed and not fully trained in HIV management," Kordy said. "They don't even have a telephone, or oxygen, or a functioning blood-pressure cuff. With a complicated group of patients with HIV, I think it's just too much for them unless they get more people."

Two staff members at the welfare society were in Dallas recently as guests of Trisha Wilson: July Letsebe, a township resident who directs the welfare society's care givers, and Stephenson, who now runs the society's international outreach programs.

In 2006, Stephenson found Letsebe in a tin shack, dying of tuberculosis. Letsebe was under the care of a local healer he calls a "witch doctor" and had spurned Western medication, despite advanced stages of both TB and HIV. Stephenson persuaded him to let the welfare society help.

Now fit and healthy at 41, Letsebe had never been on an airplane before going to Dallas, where he took in the sights of the stadium, the fire trucks at a Highland Park station and other wonders.

"I am alive," he said, "all thanks to the Wilson Foundation and the Waterberg Welfare Society."

AIDS remains the biggest health problem for the township, which has grown by more than 10,000 residents in the last five years due to an influx of refugees from the economic chaos in Zimbabwe.

"The graveyard is now eight times the size it was in 2007," Stephenson said.

Slowly, the community health workers trained at the welfare society are making a difference.

Wilson said she'd like to see other rural communities in South Africa get the same sort of help.

"There are a couple of hundred thousand people living on the other side of the mountain who have nothing," Stephenson said. "We're very lucky to have the support we do."

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