Bush's AIDS plan criticised for emphasising abstinence and forbidding condoms

Robert Walgate

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Bush accused of pressuring countries to stop producing generic drugs

Fiona Fleck Geneva

The United States has come under fire for pressuring developing countries to give up their right to produce cheap, generic anti-AIDS medicines in return for bilateral trade agreements that strengthen protection of costlier, brand name drugs.

Nobel economics laureate Joseph Stiglitz joined advocacy groups Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières this month in criticising Washington for bowing to industry pressure by pursuing a policy the groups say could prevent millions of AIDS patients in poor countries from getting the lifesaving antiretroviral drugs and treatment they need.

US officials denied their trade policy was hampering the fight against AIDS, citing international trade rules that allow flexibility when poor countries face a health crisis.

Of an estimated 38 million people infected with HIV globally, less than 10% have access to antiretroviral drugs, and many of those are in wealthy, developed countries.

In a report released at an international AIDS conference in Bangkok this month, Oxfam called on Thailand—which is negotiating a free trade agreement or bilateral trade pact with Washington—not to give in to US demands to toughen existing intellectual property or patent protection for brand name drugs.

Pharmaceutical companies say patent protection (which keeps prices of medicines high for a number of years) is vital to finance research and develop new medicines.

The Oxfam report warned that such concessions could jeopardise Thailand’s thriving generic drug industry, which produces copies of costlier patented drugs and is vital in the fight against AIDS in a country with 1.5% prevalence for people aged 15–49.

The same had applied to other countries.

Writing in the New York Times on 10 July, Professor Stiglitz said President George W Bush’s policy was “puzzling and hypocritical” because only last year he had pledged $15bn (£8bn; €12bn) to help countries in Africa and the Caribbean affected by AIDS.

“While he talks about a global campaign against AIDS and has offered substantial sums to back it up, what he is giving with one hand is being taken away with the other,” Professor Stiglitz wrote.

Bush’s AIDS plan criticised for emphasising abstinence and forbidding condoms

Robert Walgate Bangkok

A field study to be published later this year of George Bush’s new AIDS plan known as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief will say that Africans are calling the plan “unethical” for its refusal to support condom distribution and for imposing other restrictions.

The plan was announced in January 2003 and is allocating $15bn (£8bn; €12bn) to fight AIDS over five years.

The field study, carried out by the Center for Health and Gender Equity, an international reproductive health and rights organisation based in Takoma Park, Maryland, will also claim that the operational strategies in most countries are being set “almost entirely” by US officers without involving those community groups most experienced in AIDS. Local groups are being recruited, but these are mostly faith based, rather than those related to public health.

Other claims made by the centre are that the plan, which now has schemes running in 12 African countries (plus Guyana, Haiti, and Vietnam), puts excessive weight on abstinence and discriminates against any group that provides information on safe abortion.

All the claims are denied by the chief officers of the plan. Jodi Jacobson, executive director of the centre, claimed that her staff had found “a huge focus on [sexual] abstinence only.”

“What the US is doing is telling everyone to abstain from sex,” Ms Jacobson told the BMJ.

Moreover, she says, “it is prohibiting organisations from providing condoms or condom information.”

Her evidence came from “ground work with colleagues in Africa” and from officials from aid agencies—including the US Agency for International Development, the UK Department for International Development, and Denmark’s Danish International Development Agency—who had often had to speak in secret (for example, not on office phones) to staff from the centre.

According to Ms Jacobson, organisations that object to the plan’s emphasis on abstinence see their money withdrawn. One organisation in Namibia, for example, that had had funding from the US government for well over 12 years to do reproductive and social health work with adolescents, and has been favourably reviewed all of that time, has recently been cut off from funding, because they contested the president’s plan.

The same had applied to organisations that provided information on abortion. “In Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Namibia, organisations have been told that because they provide information on safe abortion services they won’t be able to get money,” she said.

Mark Dybul, the plan’s deputy chief medical officer, told the BMJ last week that the programme was soundly based on evidence of successful interventions in countries such as Uganda and Zambia. The plan embraces the “ABC” message (abstain, be faithful, or use condoms), but “AIDS is very complex, and to reduce it to any one thing is against the evidence and against common sense,” said Dr Dybul.

It was “utter nonsense” to say that the plan focused on abstinence. “They must be looking at the first, central announcements. Only $20m of $865m was on abstinence, in youth,” he said.

And $700m was for “what the field people say they want to support.”

Furthermore, he added, “to say that condoms alone are going to solve this problem is crazy. You need the full ABC message, which was really initiated by President Museveni of Uganda.”

Dr Dybul claimed that whether organisations provided information on abortion was not an issue. He also insisted that staff from the plan worked with local groups.

“We’ve been on the ground working shoulder to shoulder with folks for 20 years. Of the 1000 partners we have so far, 61% are local groups.”