

Kenyan challenges Aids drug prices

In what could become an important test of international law, an orphanage for HIV-positive children in Kenya has announced it will order Aids drugs from Cipla, an Indian drug manufacturer supplying medication at an affordable rate. The Nairobi orphanage's director, Father Angelo d'Agostino, says his decision was prompted by the "outrageous" cost of official treatment - currently \$3,000 per month. Buying cheaper drugs, he says, will enable him to treat an additional 20 children every month - but the move will bring him into direct conflict with the Kenyan government, and international drugs companies. The Indian group makes cheap 'generic' copies of drugs that are patent-protected elsewhere in the world. The United States says this is illegal and has complained to the World Trade Organisation. Father d'Agostino said the children in his care could wait no longer and that the continuing high prices of official drugs reflected the "darker side of capitalism".

Africa 'held to ransom'

He accused the big pharmaceutical companies of holding Africa to ransom and described the children in his care as "on the brink." "Some of them have skin problems and lung problems, respiratory problems which we can more-or-less control, but every day the virus is increasing in number and it's only a matter of time until it overcomes them," he added. Bringing generic drugs into the country may not be a problem for Father d'Agostino if they had been



In some African countries hit hard by Aids, it is not unusual to see children under 15 heading households. This Ugandan girl, who lost her parents to Aids, cares for a blind grandmother and younger siblings. Photo: UNICEF

donated. But buying them breaks Kenya's current laws, and could invoke the ire of the international drug companies.

Price anger

His move comes amid demands from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Kenya for the companies to honour a commitment made last year to reduce their prices. The NGOs say an offer by drug companies last year to reduce prices by up to 85% has not been followed through, and what price reductions there have been are being offered piecemeal to individual doctors. On Wednesday, drug firm Glaxo Smith Kline announced that it would offer HIV drugs at up to 90% discount to non-profit organisations, as long as these organisations take on the task of delivering the medicine to the patients. But a spokeswoman for the medical group Medecins Sans Frontieres in Nairobi said this was not enough. She said most NGOs were not in a position to medically supervise the distribution of the drugs and an across-the-board slashing of prices was urgently needed.

Source: BBC News

SABC recognises same-sex partnerships

After months of dithering, the South African Broadcasting Commission Legal Department has announced that the TV license concession that applies to married persons will also be extended to include same sex partners. This concession allows families to pay for only one TV license regardless of the number of sets in their home.

This turnaround has come after a process of more than six months, in which the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project engaged with the SABC arguing for the recognition of same sex relationships. The process started after the SABC Licensing Department began issuing summons against a number of same sex couples who refused to pay the additional levies imposed on them.

Carrie Shelver, the Director of the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, expressed her satisfaction with the outcome. "This process took much longer than was necessary, but we are nevertheless delighted. It is important for our relationships to be recognised by all role players in society and it is good to know that the national, publicly funded broadcaster, is now in line with the constitution, which explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation." The Equality Project encouraged other organisations with similarly styled policies to engage with the Project in order to proactively resolve potential conflicts.

Source: Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, South Africa