South Africa Now Offers Free Treatment to Everyone With HIV

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South Africa will provide free HIV treatment to all residents living with the virus, regardless of their CD4 count, The Associated Press reports.

As many as 7 million people in South Africa are estimated to be HIV positive, the highest number of any country in the world. Already, about 3.4 million South Africans are receiving treatment. The country's health department said the change in policy could boost the country's life expectancy from 63 year to 70 years by 2030.

Before the new treatment policy was enacted, people living with HIV were eligible for free treatment only when their CD4 counts dropped to 500 and their immune system was considered compromised. But in 2015, the AP reports, the World Health Organization recommended treating people as soon as possible in order to improve health and prolong life.

Writing on its website, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which represents users of the health care system in South Africa, supported the change in policy but noted reservations.

"While we support the change in eligibility [of HIV meds], we have serious concerns about the ability of the public health care system in our provinces to implement these new guidelines effectively," the group writes. "Firstly, we remain deeply concerned about the harmful impact of corruption on the public health care system.... Secondly, we are concerned that there is still no clear national policy for the employment of community healthcare workers and lay councillors.... Finally, providing treatment to all people living with HIV in South Africa will require much more than government just buying more pills. Providing over 7 million people with treatment requires a functioning health care system, effective medicines distribution systems, and people at all levels to ensure the system works."

For more about CD4 counts and HIV treatment, read the POZ Basics article titled "Starting HIV Treatment."

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