Unable to Get Meds, Venezuelans With HIV Turn to Guásimo

An economic crisis is leading to desperation, DIY treatments and death.

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Those in Venezuela living with HIV are running out of options when it comes to HIV meds, which are dwindling because of an economic crisis. And desperate times lead to desperate measures. According to the Miami Herald, people are resorting to natural and DIY remedies as a substitute for lifesaving medications.

The report opens with Jesús Eduardo Rodríguez using a plant called guásimo, or bay cedar, to treat his HIV. He blends the plant's leaves with water and drinks the concoction three times a day.

"Ever since I started taking it, I've been feeling better," Rodríguez, 50, told the newspaper. "Maybe this is the remedy that God sent me after all of my prayers?"

Rodríguez is not alone. A Venezuelan doctor, Carlos Pérez, said most of his 160 HIV patients have been using the plant, which is reported to be rich in tannins and polyphenols—properties believed to help fight the virus. There is, however, no solid scientific proof that the treatment actually works.

Because of Venezuela's economic crisis, even basic medications such as antibiotics and painkillers, are in short supply. What's more, hospitals often cannot test for HIV, and condoms are scarce.

"It's like Venezuela has returned to the 1980s, when people used to take shark cartilage and cat's claw to treat HIV," before antiretroviral medication became the norm, said Jesús Aguais, the founder of Aid For AIDS (AFA), in the article. "This crisis is incredibly profound." AFA is an international organization that gives unused HIV medication to people living with the virus in 43 countries, including Venezuela.

Mauricio Gutiérrez, an HIV activist in the country, told the Herald that in early 2018, less than 30 percent of those registered with the National AIDS Program in Venezuela were getting any treatment at all. Now, he says, almost no one can get antiretroviral medications.

"Once again, we're starting to see the devastating effects of...HIV, and we're seeing people with

HIV dying," Gutiérrez said. "These are deaths that could have been avoided."

For a related article, read the POZ profile on Aguais titled "Beyond Ourselves."

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