

# Lab offering cheap Aids test not with NPG

An article in *The Star* of August 6 inaccurately reported that a laboratory offering cheaper HIV/Aids tests was a member of the National Pathology Group.

The NPG is an umbrella organisation that negotiates tariffs with medical aids.

In the article it was also implied that members of the group, mainly practising in private laboratories, were not willing to assist the public sector to cope with the HIV crisis.

The laboratory in question is a specialist virology referral laboratory. Pathologists who run it are not members of the NPG.

In addition, its cost structures do not reflect those of a normal-operating laboratory, as it does not offer a full pathology service and has none of the infrastructural and logistical costs associated with running a full-service laboratory.

The NPG is a registered subgroup of the South African Medical Association (Sama) and completely supports the recent call by chairperson Khosi Letlape for doctors to support the efforts of all parties working to make anti-retroviral (ARV) therapy freely available through the public sector.

Previous attempts in the latter

half of last year and early 2002 by the NPG to engage public officials and Business South Africa, with regard to how pathologists in private practice could assist the public sector to meet the need for regular HIV/Aids testing, did not result in any action.

However, we are hopeful that in the light of Sama's call for action, and partnership with the

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TAC and Cosatu, progress might now be possible.

We are in contact with the TAC, both directly and as a member of the Sama team, and have indicated to them our willingness to enter into discussions regarding the provision of HIV testing.

For a meaningful improvement in the delivery of services to public sector patients, it will be necessary for other players to come to the party, including gov-

ernment and the importers of pathology reagents and equipment. All equipment and materials used in pathology services are imported and the dramatic decline of the rand has severely affected cost containment.

The government could consider abolishing VAT and import duties and surcharges on the equipment and reagents required to analyse patients' HIV blood samples.

Likewise, suppliers could introduce a discount on the self-same equipment, so that a reasonable fee could be established.

But all such actions will be meaningless unless the government makes appropriate ARV treatment available in the public sector, as it is pointless to test for viral load when the patient cannot be treated according to the results.

Adequate training and abilities of the clinicians administering therapy are also essential components in a holistic approach.

Everyone in SA needs to join hands to combat the scourge of HIV/Aids. Our members have indicated their willingness to be counted among those who, in the spirit of Hippocrates, care.

**Dr A C Harrison**

Chairman, National Pathology Group