***“Adolescents on antiretroviral treatment face so many challenges”***

It is 12 midnight as 16-year-old Tino\* walks into the one-bedroomed house in Mbare, Harare, which he shares with his parents and four siblings.

Tino is HIV-positive and on antiretroviral (ARV) treatment, but often he forgets to take his medication. The reason, he says, is that he spends so little time at home. Because of the limited space in their house, his family sleep in shifts at night, and Tino is out of the house as much as he can. When he goes out to meet his friends, Tino does not take his medicine with him because of the stigma associated with the disease. By the time he gets back home, it is usually late, and Tino is either too exhausted or too drunk to remember to take it.

As a result of missing so many doses, Tino’s first-line HIV drugs stopped being effective. Tino’s viral load – the amount of the virus in his blood – increased significantly and his health deteriorated dramatically.

Doctors switched Tino to second-line treatment and, within two weeks, he started to show signs of recovery. The shock of falling sick has made him realise the importance of sticking to his treatment in the future.

Tino is one of many adolescents on ARV treatment in Mbare, most of whom find it hard to take their medication regularly due to various competing pressures, including fear of stigma and difficult living conditions.

“Being an adolescent on ARV treatment is not easy,” says Cosmas Kagogoda, an MSF counsellor at the Edith Opperman clinic in Mbare, where an MSF team provides treatment and support to people living with HIV alongside the City of Harare Health Department.

“HIV-positive adolescents face many challenges,” says Cosmas. “These include stigma and discrimination, both from themselves and from their peers, and a failure to appreciate the nature of the condition they have.”

When MSF started its HIV programme at the Edith Opperman clinic in January 2016, it found that as many as 44 percent of adolescents in Mbare were not taking their treatment consistently.

“Adolescents are a special group of people who need to be followed up regularly and be reminded that they have to take their medication,” says Cosmas.

One major challenge is the use of recreational drugs by many teenagers. “Normally, they should take their ARV medication at 7 or 8 pm, which is often the time when they will be high on drugs, and sometimes they forget that they are supposed to go back home to take their medicines,” says Cosmas. “We encourage them to take their medicines with them if they know they cannot get home earlier. But often they worry that their friends would know that they are on ARV treatment, and this fear of stigma hinders adolescents from adhering to their treatment.”

The MSF team is working hand in hand with the teenagers’ parents and caregivers to allay their anxieties. “Most parents are concerned that their children may want to get married, but will find it difficult to disclose their HIV status to their spouses,” says Cosmas. “We give them guidance on advising their children how to disclose their status to their partners.”

MSF’s programme for adolescents has been very successful, says Cosmas. “We have made a huge impact since the introduction of the programme. Many adolescents are coming to the clinic because of the free services that we are offering, and their viral loads are going down.”

Cosmas tells the story of one adolescent who was in a very poor condition. “When he came to the clinic, the boy could not walk and his body was wasted,” says Cosmas. “We switched him to second-line treatment and, after two weeks, he started to show signs of recovery – he could walk on his own to the clinic with the aid of a stick. Now he has recovered and, every time we meet him, he is very thankful.”

*MSF, alongside the City of Harare Health Department, has run an adolescent-friendly corner at the Edith Opperman clinic in Mbare, Harare, since November 2015. MSF provides adolescent- friendly services that include general health check-ups, HIV testing and counselling, screening for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and family planning, all free of charge.*

\*Not his real name