

Aids comic book dispels the myths

Battle against virus comes alive in simple terminology

LYSE COMINS

DAVE Briggs knows that the eyes of many South Africans glaze over at the mention of Aids. That's exactly why this microbiologist from Pinetown has gone on a mission to share his enthusiasm for understanding the deadly virus in a colourful book before World Aids Day on Thursday.

And after spending an hour with the author and his comic book *The Fight Against HIV/Aids*, the body's CD4 white blood cells' battle against the virus comes alive in simple, scientific, microbiological terms for the layman.

"I want to turn HIV into something that is interesting because it is interesting," Briggs says.

"I tried to design the cover with the main factors of HIV/Aids.

"The virus, depicted as a green monster, has spikes and without the spikes it can't gain entry to the white blood cells.

"The white blood cells, CD4, are soldier cells that fight off infections, so I dressed a white blood cell in a UN soldier's camouflage.

"They have missed the boat on HIV education, focusing only on condoms and safe sex. HIV is so interesting."

He obtained a degree in microbiology at the University of Pietermaritzburg but instead of studying medicine as he had originally intended, he ended up following a sporting career.

He paraglided and paddled the Dusi 20 times until an injury put him out of action.

Briggs also lost the opportunity to represent South Africa in masters canoe events abroad. But now he is fuelling his first passion.

"Coming from a biochemistry background I like viruses and micro-organisms and I got sick of people talking nonsense about HIV/Aids.

"They are not giving people the right information."



LAYMAN'S GUIDE: Dave Briggs tackles the myths and choices around HIV/Aids in his full-colour comic book *The Fight Against HIV/Aids* which brings to life two stories - one of a "hero" who dies because he made the wrong choices and another about a woman who is raped and survives to be HIV negative because she got treatment in time.

PICTURE: GCINA NDWALANE

In Briggs's view, HIV/Aids education and the material available has resulted in "Aids fatigue" because not enough is explained to the layman on a microbiological level and about how the virus works during its attack on the human immune system.

This is what prompted him to write the comic book.

"People do not know what they are talking about with HIV in this country.

I was talking to a nursing sister at King Edward Hospital and I asked her if flu is a virus and HIV is a virus and we treat flu with antibiotics then why can't we treat HIV with antibiotics?" said Briggs.

"She replied that she did not know.

"The bottom line is we don't treat flu with antibiotics because they don't work against

viruses; it's the bacteria that antibiotics combat and she did not even know this."

Briggs explained how HIV attacks the body's CD4 white blood cells, entering the nucleus and the DNA of the cells as the spikes on the virus lock into the white cells.

"I have kept this book very basic. I wanted it to be picture oriented rather than reams of pages, because if I asked you to recall the cover you would be able to tell me it is a soldier cell and a virus strangling it.

"People respond to visual recall rather than mental recall. This is the first book of its kind and I have tried to dispel myths like you can be cured by raping a virgin or eating a bat's flesh."

Briggs says the response to his book from local NGOs has not been big, but he has sold a



few thousand books to schools and organisations in the US.

"All the major role players seem to be getting money in and are keeping it in-house and not letting anyone else in."

Without political connections, he says it is impossible to tap into local markets in the educational and health sectors.

Undeterred, he is now working with world-renowned Aids

expert Professor Alan Smith on a layman's textbook entitled *Understanding HIV/Aids*.

In this book he will tackle questions of why you can't get the virus from mosquitoes and why it can be known as a "genetic disease" but cannot be treated with antibiotics.

"I am going to make a powerpoint presentation and go and talk to businesses about

it but I don't think we will publish it because publishers are tired of books on HIV/Aids," Briggs says.

An estimated 17 million people have died globally since the HIV/Aids epidemic began in the 1970s. More than 3.3 million were children.

An additional 12 million children have been orphaned by Aids in Africa alone.

Globally, an estimated 33.3 million people are living with HIV/Aids.

World Aids day is an opportunity for people worldwide to unite in the fight against HIV show their support for people living with HIV and commemorate those who have died.

• Dave Briggs can be contacted at 082 550 1462 or visit www.aids-education.co.za

Children's hospital revamp to start soon

LYSE COMINS

THE LONG-awaited revamp of the dilapidated KZN Children's Hospital in the Addington Health precinct will start in the New Year. Health MEC Sibongiseni Dhlomo announced yesterday.

Briefing the media at the opening of the newly constructed R150 million Kwa-Mashu Community Health Care Centre, Dhlomo said the old hospital in Addington would be returned to its former glory as one of the country's top children's health facilities.

Head of department Sibongile Zungu highlighted several of the 950 infrastructure projects completed since June 2009, which are part of the provincial hospital revitalisation plan before the implementation of National Health Insurance. The department also intends to attract compassionate nursing staff by sourcing employees from among community care workers.

"We have really squeezed ourselves and the department is starting construction with R50m for the first phase starting from next year in early January," Dhlomo said.

He said the hospital would be returned to its "former glory", which was on a par with and predated Cape Town's renowned Red Cross Children's Hospital.

Zungu, highlighting projects across the province, said the department had invested R2.2 billion in infrastructure developments over the past two years. She said the department's estimated R0.4bn under-spending was just a technicality because, in fact, R550m had been committed to fund various projects including the purchase of new ambulances, while R60m had been committed to hospital infrastructure spending and revitalisation.

However, Zungu said because suppliers had not invoiced the department at the end of the financial year it had appeared as under-spending. Zungu said the department had also saved R100m by cutting spending on staff travelling and hotel expenses.

Zungu said construction on the foundations of the new Dr Pixley KaSeme Hospital in KwaMashu was under way.

"This was originally designed as a district hospital but it will now be a regional hospital and will take over from Mahatma Gandhi Hospital."