



DIGNITAS

Dignitas International's 2009 Retrospective

About Us

HIV/AIDS and related illnesses have caused the preventable deaths of millions of people. Humanity's failure to halt the AIDS pandemic and to provide care for affected individuals and communities is an affront to human dignity.

Dignitas International is a medical humanitarian organization that increases access to effective HIV/AIDS-related prevention, treatment, care and support in resource-limited settings. Founded in 2003 by a group of global health and research experts, Dignitas is led by Dr. James Orbinski and James Fraser, both formerly of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF/Doctors Without Borders). Dr. Orbinski accepted the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize as International President of MSF. In 2008, he was featured in the award-winning documentary *Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma* and released a best-selling memoir entitled *An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-First Century*. Dr. Orbinski is also an associate professor at the University of Toronto. In 2008, Dignitas's Executive Director James Fraser was named a Recipient of Canada's Top 40 Under 40.

The vision of the organization is to ensure equitable access to HIV/AIDS-related prevention, treatment and care is available to all regardless of wealth, gender or geography. Dignitas's mission is to increase access to effective HIV/AIDS-related prevention, treatment and care in resource-limited settings by developing and disseminating solutions that harness the power of community.

Community-Based Care in Malawi

In October 2004, Dignitas began treating patients as part of a comprehensive HIV/AIDS program in Zomba District, Malawi, in partnership with the Ministry of Health at district and national levels. In 2009, Dignitas celebrated five years of operations in Zomba, where the organization has helped to start over 11,500 adults and children on life-saving antiretroviral medications. Additionally, nearly 5,000 patients are seeking care at decentralized health facilities in their own communities, which increases adherence to treatment and decreases the patient care burden on Zomba Central Hospital.

Program Highlights to Date¹:

- Approximately **3,800** HIV testing and counseling (HTC) sessions have been held per month in 2009, ensuring that people are aware of their HIV status and the prevention and treatment options available;
- **20** antiretroviral therapy (ART) sites have been opened at community health centres, ensuring that people can access treatment in rural and outlying communities;
- Over **11,500** people have been started on ART since 2004 – over 60% of those accessing treatment are women, and over 10% are children;
- **Hundreds** of Clinical Officers, Nurses and Community Healthcare Workers have been trained in the provision of HIV/AIDS-related services;
- **29** Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) sites have been opened across Zomba District, where an average of **2,000** mothers-to-be accessed PMTCT services every month in 2009;

¹ Statistics are current as of October 31, 2009; all statistics are collected in collaboration with the Zomba District Health Office.

- All infants of known HIV+ mothers received potentially **life-saving single-dose antiretroviral medication** at birth as part of the PMTCT program in 2009;
- **1,800** people have started TB treatment in 2009 at the integrated TB/HIV clinic that is run jointly by Dignitas and Zomba Central Hospital – approximately 60% of those tested are HIV+; and,
- **500** healthcare workers and their family members are continuously provided discreet care at the Healthcare Worker Clinic at Zomba Central Hospital.

Research and Knowledge Translation

The following represents the highlights of Dignitas’s research and knowledge translation activities in 2009:

- Impact Evaluation and Quality Improvement: Understanding the impact of our interventions as well as evaluating the quality of services delivered are core components of Dignitas’s research agenda. Key activities include: operations audits based on issues arising from implementation challenges, and good data management in regular program monitoring.
- STAT-PALM: The STAT-PALM project (Streamlined Tools and Training – Practical Approach to Lung Health Malawi) represents collaboration between Dignitas, Malawi Ministry of Health and the University of Cape Town to adapt a similar South African initiative to the Malawian context. This project effectively combines knowledge translation initiatives and health systems strengthening programming in a cluster randomized trial. The official title for the research project is, “Strengthening Human Resources for Health through Simplified Clinical Tools and Educational Outreach”.
- TB/HIV Co-Infection: The Treat-TB study is the result of a collaboration between Dignitas, Malawi Ministry of Health, MSF-Belgium, International Union Against TB and Lung Disease and the WHO. The study aims to answer the research question, “What is the prevalence of TB and other opportunistic infections in ART patients with weight loss and fever?”. Other current research projects relating to TB/HIV are: “Timing of ART during treatment for active TB in HIV co-infected patients” and “Reasons to accept or decline HIV testing and ART”.
- PMTCT Effectiveness Study: PMTCT is an essential prevention and treatment intervention for HIV, yet its effectiveness is difficult to quantify. This descriptive study explores the uptake of PMTCT services and health outcomes of mother-child pairs who went through the PMTCT program 18-24 months prior.
- Conference Presentations: 4th Southern African AIDS Conference (Durban, South Africa), Malawi National AIDS Commission (NAC) Research and Best Practices Dissemination Conference (Lilongwe, Malawi), 5th International AIDS Society (IAS) Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment, and Prevention (Cape Town, South Africa).

2010 and Beyond

At the request of the Malawi Ministry of Health at district, zonal and national levels, commencing in 2010, Dignitas will expand its services from Zomba to five additional districts that comprise Malawi’s South-East Health Zone: Balaka; Machinga; Mangochi; Mulanje; and, Phalombe. As a result of the expansion, Dignitas’s reach will grow from 700,000 people in Zomba District to over 3.1 million people, of whom approximately 17% are HIV+. Dignitas will partner with Malawi District Health Offices in each of the six districts and the Zonal Health Office of the South-East Health Zone to:

- Assist the Ministry of Health in bringing testing services, antenatal care, ART and pediatric treatment to **45 sites**;

- Train and mentor more than **2,000** healthcare workers and supervisors on topics such as HTC, PMTCT, ART, integrated supervision, early infant diagnosis and treatment of pediatric HIV infection;
- Create a **referral network** of service providers to ensure that HIV+ mothers and infants are not lost to follow-up care; and,
- Provide HIV prevention education and ART adherence support to more than **400 youth** as part of a monthly Teen Club at Tisungane Clinic.

Through these efforts, those living with HIV will be enabled to live healthy, productive lives. The risk of further HIV transmission will be greatly reduced, and families and communities will be transformed across six districts in southeastern Malawi.

Dignitas Youth

Dignitas Youth is a growing global network of young leaders engaging their communities in the international response to HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. Dignitas Youth Chapters provide meaningful opportunities for youth to become active global citizens through community involvement and innovative fundraising and awareness campaigns in support of Dignitas International. Being a part of Dignitas Youth helps many students feel like they are making a tangible difference in the international response to HIV/AIDS, helps them gain leadership skills, event planning skills, and volunteering experience, and educates and engages them in important global issues.

University of Toronto students have been integral to the Dignitas Youth movement since its inception. Since 2005, the University of Toronto St. George and Scarborough campuses have been two of our most dedicated members. Since then, more than 15 other universities across Canada, the US, and the United Kingdom have joined UofT groups in this incredible movement. As the Dignitas Youth movement continues to grow, members will have greater opportunities to network with other dedicated and enthusiastic students, young professionals, and experts in the field of international health.

Highlights from 2009

Dignitas Youth's Race for Dignity

Originally created by a UofT student, the Race for Dignity has grown into Dignitas International's flagship event. It invites students, faculty, staff, and community members to cycle on stationary bikes in a relay-style marathon event. The Race for Dignity has become a huge success because it uniquely combines educational aspects about crucial human rights issues, entertainment with live performances, music, videos, athletics, exercise, and fun through prizes, costumes, and high energy. In the 2008-2009 school year, this student-led fundraising initiative raised over \$50,000 for Dignitas's work in Malawi! Adding this to the efforts of past years, students have raised over \$150,000 through the Race for Dignity to help respond to global AIDS.

Annual Retreat

Every year, in September, students from Dignitas Youth chapters across Canada have the opportunity to participate in our annual retreat. This year representatives from numerous chapters met in Dunnville, Ontario for a weekend of training, planning, and networking. Sessions featured experts in their fields, including: Dr. Sumeet Sodhi, Director of Research at Dignitas International, who taught students all about Dignitas's program in Malawi. Dr. Lorna Adams, who discussed HIV/AIDS basics and virology. UTSC's own Drew Dudley, who shared his extensive event planning experience; and advocacy experts from Results Canada, who shared how to be effective advocates for the cause. Students left the retreat feeling well prepared and inspired to take everything they learned back to their schools and to share this information with other chapter members.

Campus Events

Dignitas Youth Chapters use their creativity and energy to host numerous other campus events at their schools to further advocate for the cause of global HIV/AIDS or to raise additional funds for Dignitas's programming. These events inspire other young people to get involved and learn more about such important issues. In 2009, campus events included everything from samosa sales to red

parties to pub nights to international health lecture series. These events raised almost \$10,000 in addition to the funds raised from the Race for Dignity!

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