

Study on link between bilharzia, HIV/Aids under the spotlight in KZN

TANYA WATERWORTH

THE PREVENTION of bilharzia may help in the war against HIV transmission.

This is the subject of a groundbreaking research project being launched in the Ugu District of KwaZulu-Natal by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), in collaboration with several leading international universities

This week UKZN confirmed that Ugu district is the hub of a study in the treatment of genital schistosomiasis (GS) – commonly known as bilharzia – with the official opening of a youth clinic and research site taking place last Friday.

The study on the gender-based health problem of female genital schistosomiasis (FGS) is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Oslo University Hospital in Norway.

In 2009, the World Health Organisation (WHO) convened a meeting to stress the importance of further research into the likelihood that the treatment of GS could contribute to the control of HIV transmission.



FOCUSED: Siphso Zulu, laboratory manager at the Vibe Youth Clinic, examines a slide for bilharzia eggs.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED

UKZN's Professor Myra Taylor explained that FGS was first identified by a Dr Madden in Egypt in 1899.

"Genital schistosomiasis is a neglected disease that results from the infection. Bilharzia may affect different parts of the reproductive tract and can result in problems such as infertility, ectopic pregnancies, abortion, ovarian cysts and cervicitis.

"Up to 75% of women in areas endemic for urogenital schistosomiasis may have female genital schistosomiasis. As many as 45 million women, mainly in rural sub-Saharan Africa, are likely to be affected," said Taylor.

She said bilharzia may cause chronic inflammation and damage to the genital epithelium which may increase susceptibility to contracting HIV, and that maps indicating the prevalence of HIV and urinary bilharzia in Africa show an overlapping pattern.

Commenting on the prevalence of bilharzia in KZN, Taylor added, "In areas below 300 metres altitude, the prevalence can range up to 80%. In 2010 we reported a prevalence of 32% in Ugu – one in three girls in this group of 1 000 girls between the ages of 10-12 years.

"By treating girls at an early age, and regularly, we hope we can prevent the damage that results from chronic infections. This is what our study will investigate."

She said the prevalence of bilharzia in older girls in Ugu was also being investigated, but very few investigations had been made in this group and, to

date, too few girls had been tested.

Bilharzia can be prevented by good sanitation as it is transmitted through water contaminated by bilharzia-infested urine and faeces.

Studies have been undertaken among males in Madagascar, with the WHO stating in 2009 that "urogenital schistosomiasis also affects men, inducing pathology of the seminal vesicles, prostate and other genital organs".

It is estimated that there are more than 200 million women globally who are infected with bilharzia. It is a chronic illness – mainly prevalent in school-going children – which may damage organs, impair cognitive development and lead to a number of secondary conditions, including HIV.

"In the fight against genital disease and HIV, it is envisaged that this project will have far-reaching, positive consequences. Bilharzia is a disease that once detected can be easily managed and possibly decrease the risk of HIV transmission," a UKZN media statement revealed this week.

"In South Africa, around 4.5 million people are infected with schistosomiasis. A huge problem is the identification of genital bilharzia in women and the treatment thereof."

As principal investigators, Taylor and Oslo University Hospital's Dr Eyrun Kjetland have met school principals, Department of Education District officials and the Department of Health district officials to introduce the project to the community.

Taylor confirmed that according to Resolution 54.19 of the World Health Assembly, WHO's governing body, recommends "that member states regularly treat all at-risk school-aged children with single-dose drugs against schistosomiasis and soil-transmitted helminth infections".