



Mercedes-Benz SA teaches the world about disease prevention

Tersia Booyzen - From: Occupational Risk

The model used by Mercedes-Benz South Africa (MBSA) to counteract the impact of HIV and Aids has become sought after around the world, due to the success achieved by the motor manufacturer in the past 10 years.

Group Health Advisor, and a key figure in driving the MBSA workplace and community health programmes, Dr. Clifford Panter, gave input at a high level international conference run by GBC Health, formerly the Global Business Coalition on HIV and Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria in New York recently. Some of the illustrious participants included Gordon Brown, Sir Richard Branson, Sarah Jessica Parker, Ted Turner, and George Soros. Dr. Panter joined a panel of business leaders to discuss lessons learned by the private sector in their HIV and Aids programmes, which can in turn be implemented to successfully halt the spread of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) causing havoc around the world.

MBSA has been instrumental in leading the fight against HIV and Aids in the workplace, and was one of the first corporates in South Africa to implement a programme to mitigate the effect of the disease on its operations, as far back as 2000. Since then, the South African subsidiary of global parent company, Daimler AG, has become the centre of excellence within the group, giving strategic direction to its sister companies on HIV and Aids prevention programmes.

Kudos have streamed in for MBSA and Daimler AG over the past 10 years, with the company amassing nine prestigious awards, including: a GBC business excellence award in 2002, a commendation from the GBC in 2008 for its public private partnership project - Siyakhana, International Business Association Stevie Awards in 2004 and 2010 respectively, a Mail and Guardian Investing in the Future Award in 2003 and a NOSA Workplace Programme Excellence Award in 2004.

The MBSA Workplace Programme has had far reaching effects in its 10 years of existence, registering milestones and success such as:

- First corporate in South Africa to implement a comprehensive HIV and Aids Workplace Programme
- In 1999, became the first company to provide free anti-retroviral treatment to all employees and their families

- Stabilisation of the HIV infection rate at 8% (compared to the national rate of 19% amongst the economically active)
- 95% testing uptake amongst employees, with 40% testing annually
- 95% five-year survival and 89% 10-year survival of employees on ARV's
- Significant reduction in AIDS-related disability and death rates
- No significant absenteeism or impact on productivity

"Greater awareness and action is needed amongst businesses in developing countries around the ever increasing double burden of communicable and non communicable diseases - including the combined impacts on working people and workplaces," Dr. Panter says.

Research by the World Health Organisation shows that almost two thirds of deaths worldwide can be attributed to NCDs, or the so-called lifestyle diseases. These include cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases. Furthermore, research estimates that these diseases will be responsible for 15% more deaths globally between 2010 and 2020. An even more alarming trend is that 80% of NCD related deaths occur in low and middle income countries, further impacting on their socio-economic woes.

"This underpins the need to identify a successful model that is worthy of being replicated world-wide to counteract the effect of NCDs," Dr. Panter believes. *"It is also the reason why Daimler and MBSA are keen to assist wherever possible by sharing our best practise examples."*

In 2006 the company expanded the reach of its workplace programme when it joined hands with partners to start the Siyakhana project, which replicates the workplace wellness mode, supplying comprehensive occupational health, primary healthcare and well-being services to participating small and medium businesses in the Eastern Cape. Other HIV and Aids initiatives in communities supported by MBSA include a project that assists orphans and vulnerable children in the south of Johannesburg, as well as a public private partnership to staunch the spread of the disease in the freight industry.