

Finger-pointing as state runs out of AIDS drugs

A SHORTAGE of an essential AIDS drug this week has revealed shortcomings in the Department of Health's medicines supply chain management, casting the spotlight on one of the many service delivery problems the pilot sites for National Health Insurance will have to tackle. Public health facilities frequently run short of even the most basic medical supplies. In January, Chris Hani Baragwanath ran out of Panado and some antibiotics. Vital stocks of tenofovir have run dangerously low at clinics and hospitals in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and North West, according to the Southern African HIV Clinicians' Society, putting patients at risk of drug resistance. According to the society's president, Francesca Conradie, Gauteng's Helen Joseph Hospital usually receives 10 000 packs a month, but by Tuesday had received only 300. Tenofovir is the backbone of HIV treatment, and is used by most of SA's HIV patients. The alternative is stavudine, but it has occasionally dangerous side-effects. The shortage of tenofovir has prompted finger-pointing on all sides, with the department's deputy director-general for health regulation and compliance, Anban Pillay, saying pharmaceutical companies were struggling to meet demand, and drug makers insisting provincial health departments failed to order stock early enough, after donor-funded supplies ran out at the end of last year. SA secured funding from the US government in 2009 after several provinces ran out of money for AIDS drugs. The government's two-year tender to supply tenofovir was split between Aspen Pharmacare (70 percent) and Sonke Pharmaceuticals (30 percent). Pillay said the pharmaceutical companies obviously had a supply problem. He said Gauteng ordered 152 270 packs in November and 140 000 packs in December and Aspen delivered 91 000 packs in February and 40 000 packs in March. He said that Sonke also had a problem and was not supplying anything close to what was promised. He said Sonke somehow thought the figures given to them were inflated and have said they were not able to cope with demand. Both companies challenged Pillay's version of events, saying they were more than capable of meeting their contractual obligations. They said the provincial health departments placed their orders late, and ordered much larger quantities than the government had called for in its tender. Aspen's head of strategic trade development, Stavros Nicolaou, said the upsurge had been met adding that the issue was demand management. The tender required Aspen to provide about 420 000 packs a month, but larger orders had been placed after the donor stock was exhausted. Nicolaou said Aspen had had orders for 780 000 packs, which made it look like it was undersupplying. Sonke CEO Sotse Segoneco said the department did not appreciate the lead-time required to scale up production. She said it took three months to increase production and that they did not order for 10 or 11 months, and orders were now flooding in. Both companies said they had continued to supply Gauteng, despite its outstanding debts.