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Crossword

HIV positive and forced by poverty to breastfeed

By Nick Britten

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- [Telegraph Christmas Charity Appeal](#)

As she breastfeeds her three-month-old twins, James and John, Asina Ajabu is playing a lottery with lives that have barely begun.

Ajabu is HIV positive but has deliberately not been told that breastfeeding is highly infectious and that, in effect, she risks passing on a death sentence every time she raises her children to her breast.

Incredibly, she and millions of new mothers in Malawi who, like her, carry HIV, are ordered to breastfeed, but only for the first six months.

It may appear illogical but there is no alternative. Mothers like Ajabu cannot afford powdered milk so are faced with a seemingly unwinnable situation: either breastfeed the babies and risk passing on HIV or they starve to death.

The medical reasoning is that for six months, babies' defences against contracting HIV are at their strongest, boosted by an injection of anti-retroviral drugs when they are 72 hours old.

After that, their ability to stave off the virus drops sharply, but because of a lack of food, money and medical assistance, mothers are too often forced to continue breastfeeding and play an increasingly dangerous game with their children's lives.



Asina Ajabu with her three-month-old twins

advertisement

Nearly one million people are estimated to be living with Aids in Malawi. While the national rate hovers between 15 and 20 per cent, anecdotal evidence suggests that in poorer areas it is as high as 50 per cent.

It is estimated that 1.2 million children have been left orphaned, a figure expected to double by 2010.

Since 2003, when a major programme to tackle the epidemic was announced, charities and government organisations from Britain and America have pumped millions of pounds into Aids programmes.

The money is having an effect – prevalence rates in urban areas are falling – but it is also clear that outside the towns and cities,

efforts are being hampered by a lack of education and the unwillingness of men to turn their backs on promiscuity.

It is not just the infected who suffer. More than a million orphans are looked after by relatives, forcing them into further poverty with extra mouths to feed.

The MicroLoan Foundation – one of the Telegraph Christmas Appeal's charities this year – which gives business loans to women in Malawi to help them become self-sufficient, can do much to help affected families but the charity knows the underlying problems have to be addressed.

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Ajabu is a member of the Vinjenje support group in Nkhotakota, a town in central Malawi, formed to offer help members and spread the message about Aids.

Some members were lent money by MicroLoan to buy chickens and sell eggs, but the scheme failed as one by one those involved in that co-operative, apart from Ajabu, died. The group is currently organising a loan to buy a maize mill.

She said: "I find it incredibly distressing to think that my babies might have HIV. Sometimes it gets too much for me and I take them to the hospital to be tested. But every time they send me away saying they cannot test them until they are one year old.

"The problem is that men hide away and continue to be promiscuous. If they find you have HIV, they dump you and find another wife and spread it to her. None of them takes responsibility."

The MicroLoan Foundation is heavily involved in AIDS education and health protection, working alongside specialist charities. Two years ago the charity conducted a series of in-depth studies and began pilot educational projects.

Peter Ryan, executive chairman of the charity, says: "We decided early on that you cannot divorce the effective provision of micro credit to a community from the realities of the health situation."

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