

# Prescription for AIDS zone: food plus medicine

## MY VIEW

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**E**LDORRET, Kenya — Here on the dusty frontlines of one of Africa's worst battle zones for AIDS, visitors like us are often astonished to find doctors handing out detailed prescriptions for food along with anti-AIDS drugs.

Food and nutrition are, in fact, vital weapons in the continent's struggle against the devastation of AIDS, which in some African countries has cut life expectancy in half and left a tragic legacy of millions of AIDS orphans.

The Bush administration's intervention on AIDS is making meaningful inroads in Africa, enabling antiretroviral drugs to become widely available. This support is praised by Africans and foreign aid



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workers everywhere we visited during our recent 10-day fact-finding mission to Africa.

And yet the effectiveness of that multibillion-dollar investment could be greatly enhanced through following the prescription for success we witnessed with our own eyes: food along with the medicine. It's a prescription that is endorsed by the heads of UNAIDS and the World Health Organization.

Most drugs come with instructions to take before or after meals — a regimen designed for affluent parts of the world where starvation is not a threat.

Yet on a continent where one in three Africans is malnourished and lives on \$1 a day, many living with HIV can't take even one daily meal for granted. Powerful drugs may sustain life, but they don't work nearly as effectively on depleted bodies and empty stomachs.

Field research has demon-

strated that providing the right food and nutrition at the right moment can make a tremendous difference in helping individuals survive longer, keeping them at school and off the streets, and helping families stay together. It is an idea that, thankfully, is finally catching on.

Here in Eldoret, we visited an innovative program — Academic Model for the Prevention and Treatment of HIV/AIDS in Kenya (AMPATH) — which set out to prove that holistic intervention in the lives of people living with HIV can work minor miracles.

AMPATH was launched four years ago as a partnership between two Kenyan medical schools and the Indiana University School of Medicine. It provides anti-retroviral treatment to more than 15,000 HIV-infected

Kenyans and, thanks to generous grants from the U.S. government, aims to double that number by this time next year.

Up to half of all new patients in AMPATH's drug therapy are highly malnourished. Dr. Joseph Mamlin told us

how clinicians were shocked to find the average newcomer weighed about 108 pounds. Because, in his words, "drugs don't have any calories," AMPATH created a comprehensive program that involves food "prescriptions" as well as cooking lessons to ensure good nutrition, the development of farms and individual vegetable plots for those on the AIDS drugs.

The U.N. World Food Program supports 440 AMPATH patients and their families with food. Food is provided for only six months

during the patient's initial period of treatment and immune reconstruction, unless the individual remains very ill. AMPATH finds most patients gain enough weight and strength by then to return to normal activities. It is amazing how this simple "prescription" can literally turn lives around.

In Kenya's AIDS-devastated Busia and Bondo districts, where WFP provides food to more than 36,000 orphans, vulnerable children and their caretakers, documented results show significant drops in child malnutrition, improved family health and better school attendance. Evidence shows that keeping kids in school can also protect them from HIV infection.

With well-targeted support of medication and good nutrition, Africans can get back on their feet to confront this terrible scourge. It is an intervention that will maximize the human and material impact of the U.S. government's great investment in fighting AIDS in Africa.

★ Matz is board chairman and Sendelback is chief executive officer of Friends of the World Food Program, a Washington-based nonprofit supporting WFP activities.



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