

Headline **WHO: Use HIV drugs earlier**
Date **20 Jul 2010**
MediaTitle **New Straits Times**
Section **World**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **136,530 / 330,000**

Language **English**
Page No **32**
Article Size **171 cm²**
Color **Black/white**
ADValue **2,368**
PRValue **7,103**



WHO: Use HIV drugs earlier

VIENNA: The World Health Organisation issued yesterday the first overhaul of its guidelines on HIV drugs in four years, saying the therapy that was now saving more than five million lives should be initiated at an earlier stage of infection.

A phonebook-sized volume issued at the International AIDS Conference here confirmed and amplified a key recommendation made by the United Nations agency last year about earlier use of antiretroviral therapy (ART).

In 2006, the WHO advised drug initiation when the tally CD4 cells — the key immune cells targeted by HIV — reached 200 cells or less per microlitre of blood (mLb), a stage that meant a patient's immune system had already been badly weakened by the virus.

Last year, citing evidence about the drug cocktail's effectiveness and safety, it raised the figure to 350 CD4 cells per mLb — which meant at an earlier stage of infection — for “all adolescents and adults, including pregnant women”.

This recommendation is spelled out in the new report, *Antiretroviral Therapy for HIV infection in Adults and Adolescents: Recommendations for a Public Health Approach*, along with many other guidelines on drug use, including second-line therapy if a first course of treatment fails.

“Those with severe or advanced clinical dis-

ease (WHO clinical stage three or four) should start ART irrespective of their CD4 cell count.”

First-line therapy should consist of a simplified, low-toxicity regimen of drugs aimed at key enzymes that help the virus to replicate in CD4 cells, the WHO said.

The combination should comprise one non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor and two nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor, one of which should be either zidovudine or tenofovir.

“Countries should take steps to progressively reduce the use of stavudine in first-line regimens because of its well-recognised toxicities,” the WHO cautioned.

The UN's recommendation of 350 CD4 cells per mLb compares with advice of 500 CD4 cells or below, which was issued on Sunday by a separate panel just before the six-day 18th International AIDS Conference began.

The threshold, proposed by the US branch of the International AIDS Society, is applicable to countries that have the budget and infrastructure for treating people earlier.

ART can reduce levels of HIV to below detectable levels, although does not eradicate the pathogen completely and, for many patients, carries toxic side effects ranging from nausea and cramps to redistribution of fat around the body. — AFP