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# Treating TB means months of pills, intense monitoring

**JOHANNESBURG:** At a clinic in a poor South African township, Themba Grammary puts five anti-tuberculosis pills in his mouth, then sticks out his tongue so his nurse can make sure he's swallowed his medicine.

"Some patients hide the pills because they say it's too much for them," says the 48-year-old, who lives in the impoverished neighbourhood of Alexandra, north of Johannesburg.

Tuberculosis treatment lasts at least six months and requires taking multiple pills on a regular schedule each day. As Grammary knows all too well, the side effects can be debilitating.

"Sometimes I am feeling numb in my legs," he says.

But for him, the pills are a life-or-death matter. Like 5.7 per cent of South Africa's 48 million people, Grammary is HIV positive, making him highly vulnerable to TB.

Every year, more than 300,000 people with HIV contract TB in South Africa, and 110,000 die of the bacterial lung infection.

Grammary, who says he feared his neighbours would ostracise him for having HIV, had never sought anti-retroviral treatment.

But when he caught tuberculosis for the second time at the beginning of 2010,

he had no choice but to go to the local health centre.

"When I came here, I was very skinny. I could not walk. I waited too long," he says.

His nurse, Vuyelwa Twalo, says test results showed Grammary's immune system was on the verge of collapse.

"His CD4 count was 24. Ours is around 800!" she says.

"Without his treatment, he would be gone by now."

For 40 days, Grammary received daily injections. Since then, he's been going to the small clinic every day to get five pills that he takes under Twalo's watchful eye.

Patients who abandon their treatment regimen can develop a drug-resistant strain of the disease and infect those around them.

"We have to make sure that they take the medication at a regular time and don't defect," Twalo says.

To fight multi-drug resistant TB, the World Health Organisation has since the 1990s recommended a treatment strategy called DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment Short course), which requires taking pills under the surveillance of an

observer. According to a report by the Stop TB Partnership released Wednesday, 49 million TB patients worldwide have been treated under the system in the past 15 years. Of those, 41 million have been cured, a success rate of 86 per cent.

In Alexandra, when patients refuse to come to the clinic every day, Twalo tries to find an observer at the patient's home or work place.

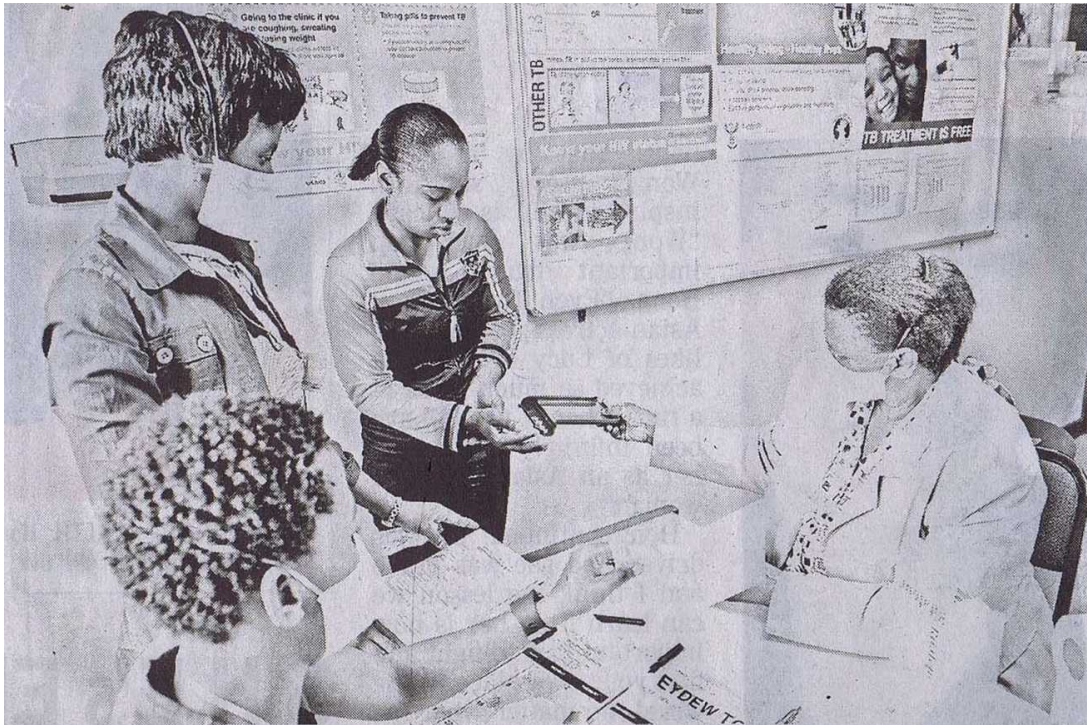
But multi-drug resistant TB still strikes in South Africa, where the WHO detected at least 14,000 cases in 2008. Christian Lienhardt, senior research advisor for the Stop TB Partnership, says a massive investment in treatment research is needed to dramatically reduce the prevalence of the disease. — AFP

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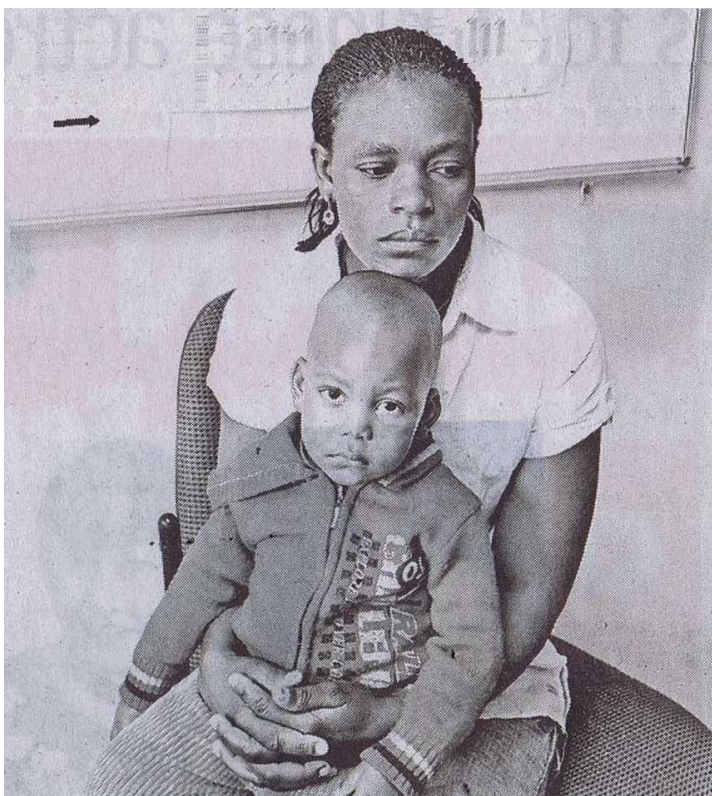
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**RECEIVING PILLS:** A tuberculosis (TB) patient (second right) receives her anti-tuberculosis pills at a clinic in Alexandra township, north of Johannesburg. Ten million people will die of tuberculosis in the next five years if global funding to fight the disease is not increased, the Stop TB Partnership warned. Tuberculosis treatment lasts at least six months and requires taking multiple pills on a regular schedule each day, with potentially debilitating side effects. — AFP photos



**WAITING FOR TREATMENT:** A mother and her son wait for anti-tuberculosis pills at a clinic in Alexandra township.