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No new grants for health programmes to fight Aids menace

By David Brown

THE Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which underwrites AIDS treatment for about half the people getting it in developing countries, has announced that it won't make any new grants for the next two years because of the worldwide economic downturn.

The Geneva-based organisation says it will continue to support about 400 AIDS treatment and prevention programmes in more than 100 countries for now, but it won't pay for them to add patients or increase services.

"We cannot at the moment encourage in good faith an expansion of these programmes," Christoph Benn, the fund's director of external relations, said Wednesday after a two-day meeting in Ghana of the board's directors.

The decision comes at a time of growing clamour to scale up AIDS treatment in countries hardest hit by the disease, especially nations in sub-Saharan Africa.

A study earlier this year showed that treating infected people with antiretroviral drugs cuts their chance of transmitting the virus by 96 per cent, leading to calls for a "treatment-as-prevention" strategy against the epidemic.

Other research has shown that

adoption of circumcision by African men and more aggressive treatment of HIV-infected pregnant women can also drive HIV incidence down steeply. In a speech three weeks ago, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said an "AIDS-free generation... is possible with the knowledge and interventions we have right now."

With the Global Fund standing pat, that goal will be much more elusive.

The Global Fund has dispensed about US\$15 billion since its creation in 2002, including US\$2.8 billion this year. Nearly all of its money comes from western industrialised countries, with the United States by far the largest donor. The money is distributed in competitive grants to health ministries and charities in needy countries.

About 14.2 million people in low- and middle-income countries, mostly in Africa, qualify on medical grounds for treatment with antiretroviral drugs. At least 6.6 million are now getting that treatment, with the Global Fund paying for the care of about 3.2 million people. A similar number are supported by the US government through the

President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), created by President George W. Bush in

2003.

The fund needs US\$7 billion to pay for grants already awarded and has pledges to cover them. The European financial crisis, however, has cast an ominous shadow across this funding stream.

Matthew Kavanagh of Health GAP (Global Access Project), an advocacy organisation in New York, called the Global Fund's decision "irresponsible and reckless." He characterised the amount of money needed to continue expansion of AIDS treatment as "a rounding error in the budgets of wealthy donor nations."

The board's decision, however, reflects the grim recognition that its greater responsibility is to people already in Global Fund-funded programmes who might die if the money ran out or was switched to other purposes.

"We do realise we have a very strong obligation to support these programmes," Benn said. "We can guarantee that programmes that are currently running will continue."

The fund's directors also decided that China, Russia, Mexico and Argentina will no longer be eligible for Global Fund grants because they can afford to pay for the health programmes on their own. — WP-Bloomberg