

Swedish Industry has joined the fight against HIV

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The International Council of Swedish Industry (NIR) has initiated the Swedish Workplace HIV and Aids Programme (SWHAP) together with the Swedish Industrial and Metal Workers' Union (IF Metall) for the benefit of some of the countries most seriously affected by the Aids pandemic.

World Aids Day is observed on 1 December every year. It is dedicated to the over 25 million people who have died of AIDS and the approximately 40 million men, women and children who are currently infected with the disease. Around 90 percent are in the productive and reproductive age bracket. Thus society and the business world are particularly vulnerable to the HIV and Aids pandemic.

The workplace, where we spend a lot of time, is an ideal forum to reach people and to influence attitudes and behaviour.

Recognising the potential of the corporate sector in preventing the spread of this dreaded disease and also in limiting its effects, the International Council of Swedish Industry (NIR) has initiated the Swedish Workplace HIV and Aids Programme (SWHAP) together with the Swedish Industrial and Metal Workers' Union (IF Metall). Today 10,000 employees at 25 workplaces in sub-Saharan Africa benefit directly from the SWHAP. Another 45,000 persons are reached through the employees' families. In addition, most companies include community outreach activities in their programmes. The SWHAP currently operates in Botswana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The results from the SWHAP have so far been most encouraging. Management and employees have shown a strong joint commitment to create and implement high-quality HIV and Aids programmes at their workplaces. Apart

from training, employees have been given the HIV test. In an environment where up to a third of all people are HIV infected this is crucial: for the employee as well as for the company. For the individual, the awareness of the HIV status is the first step to either stay negative or to "live positively"; it is a matter of accessing treatment and preventing others from being infected. At the same time and particularly in a high prevalence area, many people are frightened of taking the test. From a business perspective it is crucial for the company to know whether it is at risk of losing its human assets, and what can be done to prevent it. Experience in SWHAP has shown that to reach a high uptake of voluntary testing it is important that the employees remain confident about the programme. They have to know that they will not be discriminated against if they are infected and that they can rely on their HIV status being kept confidential.

When an environment of confidence is created and the management is first in line to be tested it is possible to attain 100% results. Happily, at several workplaces participating in the SWHAP, this is the case! Another important component of the programme is training of peer educators. In many cases the educators are HIV infected employees who choose to publicly disclose their status to their colleagues. Their courage is admirable and their decision to share their HIV status can change their co-workers' lives. These men and women are an inspiration to all. ■

Please visit www.swhap.org for more information.