

## Teaching rural teachers on World Aids Day



CHARLIZE Theron visited Zululand for the official launch of Mpilonhle at Nhliziyo School, near Mtubatuba, last month, as patron of her Africa Outreach Project, which has co-funded the mobile health and training initiative



DR MICHAEL Bennish, Mpilonhle Director, addresses NGO staff of the Mpilonhle mobile health and computer unit project and teachers from rural schools at the launch of a week-long training session for educators at Mfolozi, near Mtubatuba, on Saturday

CHRIS JENKINS

**W**ITH leadership being the theme of World Aids Day this year, it was fitting that teachers from four high schools in rural uMkhanyakude should get together last week for the launch of an intensive, week-long HIV/Aids education programme.

The programme is designed to help equip teachers with the skills needed to deal with the many health and social issues facing pupils in the district.

With teenagers among those at highest risk of HIV/Aids, behaviours established during adolescence can put individuals at risk of the deadly infection.

Teachers should be providing leadership and education about HIV and other health issues, said Dr Michael Bennish, Executive Director and founder of the Mpilonhle mobile health and computer training initiative in Zululand, an NGO cofunded by the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project and Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network.

Mpilonhle's work – dedicated to "helping in one of South Africa's

poorest and most rural communities" – was boosted last month by an R8.5 million donation from the United States government through the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief.

"Teachers themselves have received little education on HIV/Aids and thus are not well informed enough to provide the leadership that is so desperately required," said paediatrician and infectious diseases specialist Bennish, previously head of the Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies, near Mtubatuba.

### Education

"And (teachers) receive little care themselves, despite having high rates of HIV infection."

Bennish said Mpilonhle had decided to take the initiative to provide training and health services to teachers from the four high schools it served and where mobile units would be working.

The teacher training, enthusiastically received by educators at its launch at Mfolozi, near Mtubatuba, on December 1, includes group health and HIV education sessions,

and computer training using Mpilonhle's mobile computer lab.

"The week-long effort will hopefully enable teachers to take the lead in combating HIV/Aids in their schools, and allow them to understand the services that Mpilonhle is providing to pupils in their schools."

According to home-grown Hollywood actress Theron, Mpilonhle's effort to give training and services to teachers was "an essential step in assuring that schools become sites for HIV care and support, and that the mobile units I envisioned three years ago achieve the greatest impact possible".

Teachers were often blamed unfairly for problems in schools, said Bennish. At rural schools, especially, they had few resources to work with.

Addressing teachers on Saturday, Bennish said this week would focus on working with them to enable them to provide leadership in their schools on issues around HIV/Aids and to mentor them in the skills needed to help vulnerable youngsters exposed to the deadly virus, and other health and social problems they faced.

Teachers were at the coal-face of critical health and social issues, being so closely associated with young people. These youngsters included orphans and heads of households.

Mpilonhle staff spoke of their challenges working in an area where HIV, sexually transmitted infections and water-borne diseases were rife, and where alcohol was playing a major role in unwanted pregnancies, rape and abuse and the spread of diseases.

### Open up

Nonhlanhla "Poppy" Ntombela, principal of Nhliziyo High School, where the Mpilonhle programme was officially launched last month, spoke of the importance of teachers being able to identify and address problems faced by their young pupils. As well as leading by example, it was necessary to get children to open up about their problems and to give them advice.

A strong team of social and health-care workers is involved in Mpilonhle's provision of on-site nursing services at four high schools in the uMkhanyakude district, checking on the health status

of children and offering voluntary counselling and testing for HIV. Minor ailments and conditions like asthma were being attended to at the schools visited by the Mpilonhle mobile units, and teachers would also receive basic first-aid training.

Educating children and following set curricula are just part of the job of a teacher. Dealing with emotional stress, peer pressure, the alarming spread of HIV among young women and the growing number of orphans are additional challenges. This, in turn, places extra strain on teachers, many of whom themselves are young and not always able to cope.

Mpilonhle social workers said they were on hand to counsel young rape victims who were often afraid to disclose this to their teachers.

Through Mpilonhle's outreach work at individual schools, teachers and pupils would also receive advice on foster care grant applications for children under the age of 18.

Dealing with the issue of stigma was critical in getting to grips with HIV/Aids, according to Mpilonhle staff. Testing, counselling and "living positively" were also vital.