

The real global challenge

ALLTECH LOOKS TO TACKLE AIDS CRISIS

By David Wescott

COLUMNIST - LIVE LOCAL/WORK GLOBAL

It seems Alltech is taking its role as Kentucky's new global ambassador very seriously. Sponsorship of the 2010 Alltech FEI Equestrian Championships is important, but now Alltech is helping to address the most pressing global health challenge facing the world — the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The numbers associated with the global pandemic are so large they're difficult to grasp fully. At the end of 2005, nearly 40 million people in the world had HIV — a number roughly equivalent to the total population of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Tennessee. Two-thirds of this population lives in Africa. Most people with HIV live in extreme poverty — surviving on less than two dollars per day — and have nothing resembling Chandler Medical Center, Central Baptist Hospital, or Saint Joseph Healthcare. Many lack the essentials necessary for long-term survival — even without HIV.

While access to affordable medicines remains a major issue in fighting HIV in less developed countries, the attention given to the medicines issue sometimes overshadows many other relevant issues. People with HIV and AIDS have need for much more than medicines; for example,

they have considerably higher nutritional demands. Health care providers on the ground in Africa and elsewhere have raised an urgent call for nutritious food as a result. They've also asked for nutritional supplements.

"There is an important role for nutritional balance and support along with affordable medicines in fighting AIDS," said Deborah von Zinkernagel, a nurse and a project development consultant to the Pangaea Global AIDS Foundation. "As your body tries to keep the virus in check, there is an extraordinary demand on the body for protein and nutrients. It goes hand in hand with cranking up a huge immune response." The higher the viral load, the greater the nutritional need. When people with HIV are malnourished, their disease progresses more rapidly. In Africa, where good nutrition is all too scarce, the pandemic only worsens.

Alltech makes Sel-Plex, a natural selenium supplement that, when fed to food-producing farm animals, increases the nutritional value of the food. Sel-Plex can also be given directly to people in tablet form. When South Africa-based health care advocate Faith Lineya learned about Alltech's product through an Alltech customer that was working with her, she asked Alltech if they could help provide the product to a women's health project

affiliated with Faith Orphans Fund in southern Africa.

Alltech didn't hesitate. Dr. Kate Jacques, Alltech's director of nutrition, and Liz Frank, a nurse, visited Lineya in Africa. They also brought Jason Heck, a photographer, and documented their experiences online at www.alltech.com/africablog.

Of course, it's not as if the leadership at Alltech needed much persuasion. AIDS is more than a moral crisis, though that's enough to demand action — AIDS is also a threat to this global company's economic vitality. "I wouldn't know AIDS if I saw it, but I do know in South Africa 35 to 40 percent of the population are HIV positive," said Dr. Pearse Lyons, CEO of Alltech. "Within our workforce, mainly within our laborers, we have also lost 35 to 40 percent of our people. Imagine the impact if Lexmark lost this many people, or the University of Kentucky losing that much of their workforce."

Sadly, Alltech's experience isn't unique. Global companies in virtually every industry have seen the pandemic affect their bottom line. However, there are also strategic opportunities beyond simply doing the right thing. Biotechnology companies such as Alltech can learn more about the systems in which their products are administered most effectively. They can demonstrate and evaluate the efficacy and impact of their products. They can consider developing new products and services based on what they learn.

"The smarter companies understand that 'corporate social responsibility' doesn't simply mean writing a check," said Jim Jones, a former executive vice president of the Vaccine Fund, which was founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Jones currently works with this columnist at APCO Worldwide). "They're working closely with a new generation of professional advocates to develop and implement very complex systems of care. These systems relate directly to products or serv-

ices currently offered or in development. Advocates understand that philanthropy is part of the business strategy, and they're more than willing to open new avenues for companies as they fulfill their own missions."

Companies like Alltech also understand the advocates are far ahead of most governments and often make better partners on this issue. "Non-government organizations, whether they are comprised of individuals, businesses or churches, can often accomplish goals that governments lack either the finances or political will to pursue," said Alltech's Jacques. "Like other such groups, Alltech wants to find a way in which we can help."

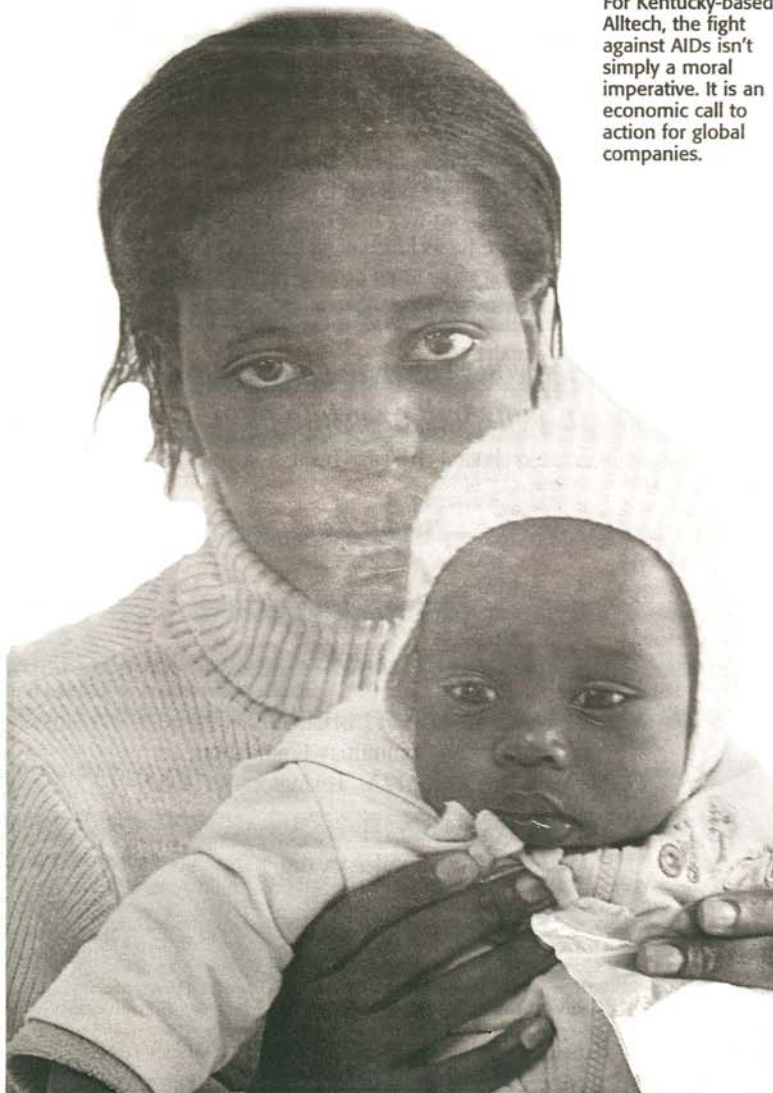
Of course, Alltech's example can help Kentuckians advocate for more resources to fight HIV as well. U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell is poised to become the Senate's Republican leader and one of the most powerful individuals in the federal government next year. "Senator McConnell will play a very important role next year on this issue," said Deborah von Zinkernagel. "The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief is up for reauthorization. Kentuckians can ask him to place a high priority on this program."

As the fight against global AIDS evolves, advocates are bracing for even more complex and costly challenges. "America has also been responding to the devastation of the AIDS epidemic in other parts of the world. Saving lives must go hand in hand with planning for the future," said von Zinkernagel. "The problem is not always the price of drugs, it's a crisis of human resources. There's a shortage of providers in the system of care."

So as Alltech answers the advocates' call for assistance, one question remains: who will join them?

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For Kentucky-based Alltech, the fight against AIDS isn't simply a moral imperative. It is an economic call to action for global companies.



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