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WHO calls for more help to fight epidemic in Africa

Friday, January 11, 2008

By Jason McLure, Bloomberg

The World Health Organization wants to expand the health-care workforce to combat HIV/AIDS in the world's poorest countries.

The organization is recommending that more than 4 million low-skill workers are hired to administer anti-retroviral drugs, provide AIDS counseling, and handle other tasks typically provided by doctors and nurses.

The move is part of a new set of guidelines aimed at helping poor countries hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic to train additional health staff and offer new incentives to doctors and nurses to keep them from emigrating to wealthy nations with doctor-shortages such as the United Kingdom.

"The HIV/AIDS epidemic has opened up the eyes of some politicians to bottlenecks in human resources," said Anders Nordstrom, an assistant director general of the WHO, during a press conference Jan. 8 at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where the new guidelines were released. "In some ways this is very sad that we had to have this kind of epidemic to do so."

Estimated to cost at least US\$7 billion over the next five years, the plan also calls for the hiring of an additional 2.4 million doctors, nurses and midwives in the developing world to help accomplish a United Nations' goal of universal access to HIV/AIDS treatment services by 2010.

The plan would be a major boost to health-care systems in sub-Saharan Africa, where health-care workers are in

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short supply. In Malawi, for example, there are more than 7,400 HIV- positive patients per doctor, according to the WHO. By comparison, there are two doctors for each HIV-positive patient in the U.S. and UK.

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