

Fighting AIDS at companies can help

Odebrecht Kicks Off the Effort

By Salas Neto

A Brazilian engineering and construction firm with a strong presence in this country, Odebrecht is investing one million US dollars in a pioneer program to fight AIDS among the workers it employs under several of its contracts in Angola.

The program, launched this past September, will cover about 30,000 people, counting workers and their immediate families at the firm's various projects in Angola. The initiative, planned to last 18 months, is getting technical support from the IFC, the private sector arm of the World Bank, an agency that has quite a bit of experience in programs of this type.

To assess the new program of fighting AIDS at Odebrecht in Angola, Sabine Durier, of the "IFC Against AIDS" program, and Sérgio Leão, an engineer responsible for all the Brazilian company's health and environment programs, visited Luanda in August and September. Durier and Leão worked alongside Dr. Vera Michel, a physician who is in charge of this pioneer program in Angola.

Talking with ANGOLENSE, Dr. Michel said the purpose of the program is to determine the prevalence of AIDS among Odebrecht workers in Angola and their families, to train educators and leaders to inform people about the risks of the disease, to increase the use of condoms and to improve medical treatment for women, especially pregnant women, in order to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Demonstrating that the model of this program can be used at Odebrecht projects in other countries is another of its general goals.

According to Biagio Cersosimo, administrative and financial director of Odebrecht (Angola), who accompanied Dr. Michel to the interview, the company originally thought of investing the money in the overall fight against the disease in this country, but since it would be difficult to assess the results, they decided to apply it on more limited scale, i.e., only to its contracts. There are five of these: Capanda, Águas de Luanda, Luanda-Sul, Canal da Matala, and Mausoléu, plus the Catoca and SDM diamond-mining projects in which Odebrecht has an interest.

Fifteen Positive Cases

Fifteen cases of AIDS have already been detected among the company's Angolan and Brazilian workers, the majority among the former. However, and in answer to our reporter's question, Cersosimo assured us that no one is being discriminated against for having contracted the disease. On the contrary, they get every possible support to enable them to stay on the job, except in cases where their health is very poor. In that event, they stop working but are not abandoned by the company, which continues to provide assistance until the worker recovers, if that happens.

Dr. Michel interrupted to say that they do not yet know how prevalent AIDS is among Odebrecht workers. She doesn't believe they have even an approximate idea of the true situation, since testing is voluntary and very few people are willing to be tested.

But, as people become aware that testing is confidential and that no one is dismissed merely because they are sero-positive, there will be a much greater willingness to take the tests. "This will encourage people to take the tests," the administrative and financial director of Odebrecht (Angola) emphasized, hopefully.

One of the people in charge of Odebrecht's anti-AIDS program in Angola took advantage of the opportunity to announce that the Capanda Project was selected as the site for the first studies of the prevalence of the disease at the company, since it affords the best conditions, at the moment, in terms of health care infrastructure.

Even so, as he confirmed, submission to the tests will remain voluntary. This is why Odebrecht will redouble its efforts to publicize the objectives of the program and increase awareness so that people change their attitudes about the vital need to participate.

Since there is no cure for the disease, Odebrecht is placing great emphasis on prevention. So much so that, besides the publicity and awareness campaigns, it has already ordered about 120,000 condoms, including female condoms, for distribution to their workers. At the same time, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases - which, as we know, facilitate infection with the AIDS virus - is also being given priority.

Asked what Angola gains from this initiative by Odebrecht, Cersosimo said that "it gains a lot." In his opinion, if everyone does a little bit, a multiplier effect kicks in, that can do much to reduce transmission of the disease to an acceptable level. He cited the example of Odebrecht's involvement in the campaign against polio to illustrate how important it is that someone take the first step. "Given the shocking figures about people with AIDS (in Angola and the world), we can't stand idly by," he emphasized.

He believes that Odebrecht's action is an example that could very well be followed by other big (foreign) companies that do business in Angola, especially the oil companies. In the case of Odebrecht, which has spent some of its profits on social projects, much of the credit goes to the efforts by Dr. Octacílio Carvalho, the company's local president, an activist in philanthropic causes.

Dr. Michel appealed to big companies to support the authorities in their battle against the pandemic, since government spending alone cannot get the job done. "Together, the companies could help tremendously," she added.