



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

**11
04th April 2023**

**CONTRIBUTION BY HONOURABLE WINNIE MOONGO (MP) ON THE NEED
IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAMS AT OMAS , AS MOVED BY
HON DR MUINJANGUE (MP)**

Hon. Speaker

Hon. Members

1. I gladly rise and take the floor today to support my fellow MP, and healthcare practitioner Dr. Esther Utjua Muinjangué on the matter of employee wellness programs in the public service and how we can use and develop these already existing platforms to make advancements in our fight against HIV/ AIDS for a healthier work force, and a healthier Namibia.
2. Hon Muinjangué is correct to point out that despite amazing wins, and the recognition our remarkable progress towards to the UNAIDS 95-95-95 target, there remains much still to be done. The fight against HIV/AIDS has not lost relevance and has not been won yet. There remain serious challenges in curbing the spread of HIV and keeping viral loads low. One such threat is the frequency at which HIV positive persons default on treatment.
3. Defaulting can be attributed to many reasons, among them are the denial of an HIV-infected / positive status, the fear of disclosure of one's status, and/or simply the mental and psychological fatigue that comes from years of

navigating socially and practically complex realities in order to be able adhere to treatment. Despite our efforts, HIV / AIDS has unfortunately, in many cases and communities remained a heavily stigmatized and misunderstood condition. Many Namibians, be they employed in the public service or elsewhere, rely on public facilities for antiretroviral treatment, where they are often met by long lines that take hours to move through, sometimes the entire day. With the current employee wellness frameworks, in private and public sectors alike, this creates a serious barrier to ARV treatment adherence.

4. Why do I say this? Our current approach to wellness at the workplace is an outdated one that does not grasp the concept of wellness for what it is. Wellness is not the mere absence of sickness. Many organisations' commitments to wellness are window dressing -in reality they adhere to the bare minimum, granting employees sick leave on request, pending justification, a sick letter or someone looking very visibly and obviously unwell / ill at work. This makes it a very taxing process to approach and convince a manager that you need time off work for your health and wellness. Employees, of course, maintain the right not to disclose their status to their employers. How does an employee explain that they spent the whole day at the clinic in pursuit of ARV treatment, and after hours of queuing could not have or complete their consultation and need to return to the clinic again the next day?
5. How does an employee do so, while retaining their right not to disclose their status, due to mere preference or fear of stigma? Such an employee is left to balance job security with treatment adherence – which is a serious issue. This is but one example of the socially and practically complex and challenging situations that cause psychological and mental fatigue, contributing to defaulting on treatment.
6. Integrating the Public Service Workplace Policy on HIV and AIDS, and all its objectives, into an expanded framework for employee wellness can address the workplace related factors that contribute to defaulting. A practical example of this could be supplementing sick days with wellness days. This will give true meaning to wellness policies and enable employees to use

either of these provisions to take care of their treatment and personal wellness needs.

7. Psycho-social, and practical support however has been proven to promote treatment adherence, and in a contemporary, result driven world, there is nothing that stops us from offering employees, irrespective of their HIV status, the social and practical support they need to pursue their individual and unique wellness needs.
8. Similarly, the very same applies to all other aspects of health and wellness, many of which are not observable merely by looking at someone's physical condition. For example, increasing divorce rates should be indicative that at home, on the family level, there are serious relational and wellness challenges being faced, that are outside of the knowledge of the employer. How do we care for employee's going through severe difficulties such as these, which they have the right not to disclose? High suicide rates, and risky behaviour such as substance abuse are some of the indicators of a declining mental state that otherwise will likely go unnoticed. An employer or manager just by looking at you cannot see that you are unwell, when you've been under prolonged emotional strain and burnout. Why should we let something become a sickness, or reach breakdown level, before we act to address it by availing sick leave when we could redefine our wellness frameworks and act in a preventative manner?
9. Would it not be more fitting to rethink our ideas of wellness, and work to understand them not as the opposite of sickness, but as the soundness and ideal condition of mental and physical wellbeing, and adjust our human resources strategies and employee wellness policies to reflect this? A practical example of this, as I've shared is to avail wellness day to employees, to allow them to take care of themselves, without full disclosure of their wellness needs. After all, while we all have unique needs at different times, many of these needs are universal in a sense, and we can all relate to needing unexplained time off to take care of deeply personal matters directly affecting our mental and physical wellbeing.
10. I sincerely believe, that in terms of social outputs, this would be a landmark decision and move us in the right direction. The world is changing, and our

approaches to labour, human resources and wellness are taking new shape, with endless academic and empirical evidence suggesting that a strategy that prioritises employee satisfaction and wellness leads to higher motivation, commitment and improved performance. We need to keep up with the times, or face being left behind.

11. As such, Honourable Speaker, Honourable members, I second this motion.

I THANK YOU.