

## Southern Africa's famine far worse than anticipated

An estimated 16 million people in southern Africa do not have enough food to last until next year's harvest, which is 6 months away. The latest data, derived from an emergency food assessment conducted by a United Nations special envoy, indicate that 1.6 million more people are at risk than was predicted in May. "The new figures confirm [that] the humanitarian crisis is devastatingly real [and] worsening faster than originally projected," said UN spokesperson James Morris. "This crisis must be an absolute top priority for the international community."

Many factors have contributed to the worst food shortage in a decade, which affects 6 countries: Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. There has been a dangerous combination of floods and drought, an absence of effective security to ensure that food is distributed fairly, a failure of governance, increasing poverty and delays in importing maize. Another factor, both contributing to and affected by the shortage, is HIV/AIDS.

HIV infection rates in southern Africa are the highest in the world; in Swaziland, 25% of adults are infected. For these countries, AIDS means less productivity, less income and less capacity for responding to other crises, such as famines. With the increased number of orphans and elderly heads of households, children are being placed at particular risk. The World Health Organization estimates that much of this disaster could be averted if WHO could dedicate US\$3.40 for each person at risk. Current funding from international donors is approximately 35 cents per person.

"The cruel irony is that we know how to save thousands of people and are ready to do it," said WHO Director-General Gro Harlem Brundtland, "yet the world seems unwilling to pay the small cost of making it happen."

Further information on the crisis and suggestions about how to help are available at [www.redcross.org/donate/donate.html](http://www.redcross.org/donate/donate.html), [www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=4](http://www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=4) or [www.savethechildren.ca](http://www.savethechildren.ca). — *James Maskalyk, CMAJ*



Suffer the children

## NB, Morgentaler head to court over abortion payments

Calling New Brunswick "the most reactionary province in Canada as far as women's rights go [and] as far as access to abortion goes," Dr. Henry Morgentaler has decided to take the province to court in an attempt to force it to pay for abortions performed at his Fredericton clinic.

In his Oct. 23 announcement, Morgentaler, who operates 8 abortion clinics across Canada, said New Brunswick has been "violating the law of the country by discriminating against women, by denying them access to abortion services to which they are entitled under medicare."

New Brunswick pays for abortions, but only if they are judged medically necessary by 2 physicians — one must be an obstetrician/gynecologist — and performed in approved hospitals. Abortions performed in private clinics such as Morgentaler's or in facilities outside the province are not covered.

Morgentaler says these requirements cause "a delay between the time a woman decides she wants an abortion

and the time when she can get one, [and this] increases the danger."

More than 3800 abortions have been performed at Morgentaler's Fredericton clinic since it opened in 1994. They currently cost from \$475 to \$725, depending on the stage of pregnancy. He estimates that the refusal to pay for private-clinic or out-of-province abortions has saved New Brunswick more than \$16 million.

Morgentaler hopes a positive court result in New Brunswick will make abortions more accessible across the country. Currently, provincial governments pay the total cost of the procedure at his clinics in St. John's, Ottawa, Toronto and Edmonton. The cost is partly covered in Montreal and Halifax, and there is no coverage in Fredericton and Winnipeg. "If we win in 1 province we set a precedent, and the law will change and the practice across the country will change."

Morgentaler says his legal costs may reach \$1 million if the case eventually

reaches the Supreme Court of Canada.

The Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL) supports Morgentaler's suit and is preparing to help fund it. "Fourteen years ago, we thought we'd won the battle for reproductive rights in Canada," said Marilyn Wilson, executive director of CARAL. "We've woken up to the fact that over the last 10 years those rights have been declining enormously across the country because of actions by the antichoice movement, by the refusal of doctors to perform or refer for abortions, by the lack of hospital care and by the lack of payment for clinic abortions."

New Brunswick Justice Minister Brad Green maintains that the province's Medical Services Payment Act, which has been in place since 1986, does not violate the Canada Health Act by refusing to pay for abortions performed outside of provincial hospitals. He also said the government is prepared to defend its position in court. — *Tracey Thorne, Fredericton*