

Traditional healer's AIDS cure in spotlight

Scientists at South Africa's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) are testing a concoction of indigenous plants used by a traditional healer who claims they “cure” HIV/AIDS.

So far the tests have revealed that one plant he uses in the milky brown drink has properties that could make it almost as effective as the antiretroviral, Indinavir.

The active ingredients from all the plants have been turned into a powder and made into a capsule. So far tests are being done on mice but the research will be continued with a human clinical trial in three southern African countries once legal permission has been obtained.

Luke Mumba, director of the Southern African Network for Biosciences, (SANBio) described the research at a presentation on African biotechnology at the 6th annual Bio2Biz conference currently underway in Durban. About 700 scientists from across the continent are attending the event, which aims to build partnerships between biotechnologists and the business community.

SANBio is the southern African arms of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Bioscience Initiative.

The research into the anti-AIDS plants that made up the traditional healer's drink is one of four initiatives being spearheaded by SANBio. The names of the plants in the drink are being kept secret.

Mumba said the plant research was the main project and was “urgent” as it was being removed by the traditional healer “in truckloads” as he tried to meet demand for his anti-AIDS medicinal drink at his clinic.

“It is all very exciting,” Mumba said.

Other projects being driven by SANBio included an indigenous mushroom growing initiative in Namibia and inland aquaculture in Malawi.

“The mushroom growing initiative is an example of how biotechnology can enable small farmers to build a livelihood from a crop that can usually only be harvested for a short time after the first seasonal rains,” Mumba said. Already small farmers had been helped to build “mushroom houses” where they could grow the mushrooms to sell. They were also taught new skills to enable them to produce the mushrooms in an artificial environment.

In Malawi the aquaculture initiative was a research project that involved the digging of fish ponds and then using covers to raise water temperatures to assess the impact on fishing volumes. Small farmers were also being encouraged to grow vegetable gardens around their fish ponds to supplement their protein diet.