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HEALTH

Safe-Blood Foundation Works To Stop AIDS Infections in Africa

By **ANGUS MACMILLAN**
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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa -- Six years ago, Jeff Busch was just another New York investment banker, but today his Safe Blood for Africa Foundation is channeling private- and public-sector funds into saving lives across the continent.

So successful has this nonprofit venture become that Safe Blood for China has been established and requests have been received to set up similar structures in Ukraine, Brazil and India.

"I was doing quite a bit of work in the health-care sector in East and West Africa and realized the massive human and economic impact that HIV/AIDS was having," the 47-year-old Mr. Busch said.

He identified a major problem as the lack of donor screening and blood testing before transfusions took place, causing hundreds of thousands of Africans to receive infected blood.

Safe Blood for Africa was founded in 1999 with its regional headquarters in Johannesburg to assist African countries in supplying safe blood to their populations. Though South Africa has its own world-class blood-banking service and receives no assistance from the foundation, Johannesburg was chosen as the organization's base because of its access to skilled personnel and logistical and cost advantages compared with other major African cities.

"I worked [the U.S.] Congress and canvassed companies for funding. It took awhile, but eventually the message got through and we're now operating in 18 countries across Africa," said Mr. Busch, who is based in the U.S. but travels to Africa regularly.

When it came to seeking funding, he was able to call on the experience he had gleaned from running a private investment-banking business and a former position as a U.S. human-rights representative to the United Nations.


While he took no salary from the foundation for the first five years, he is paid in his role as chairman.

Apart from supplying millions of paper-based blood-testing kits that cost between 80 cents and \$1.30 each, the foundation gives health-care workers practical training in donor screening, blood transfusion and blood-banking procedures.

While some companies give cash donations, others provide equipment and supplies, accounting for around 70% of the foundation's needs.

One of the first funders was **Exxon Mobil Corp.** Others include **Abbott Laboratories**, Global Med

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Technologies, **Johnson & Johnson** and **Merck & Co.** Also involved are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank and many small companies.

Some funders are driven by philanthropy, others by a mixture of wanting to help and building goodwill in countries where they do business.

Though Safe Blood for Africa operates in partnership with African governments, its funding is wholly from international companies, governments and aid agencies.

"It costs around \$4 million a year to finance our activities in Africa, which are most comprehensive in Nigeria and Botswana," Mr. Busch said.

In Botswana, which has a particularly high rate of HIV and hepatitis infections, a youth program has been created to promote healthy lifestyles.

Youths pledge to donate 25 units of blood by the age of 25. In return, the foundation provides them with recreation facilities, computer skills and other educational information.

There is evidence the program is working. In the first quarter of 2005, the amount of blood suitable for transfusions in Botswana rose 80% from a year earlier.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the foundation is helping the government to establish a national blood service operated through several regional centers.

Mr. Busch estimates Nigeria's HIV-infection rate at about 12%, but he says donor screening and an Exxon Mobil-financed training center is rapidly improving the safety of the country's two million blood transfusions annually.

Last year, 250 technicians were trained in blood-banking procedures and 400 are scheduled for training this year. Around 1,000 doctors and nurses will receive ongoing education in blood utilization and transfusion.

However, not all African countries are as keen to be assisted by the foundation as Nigeria and Botswana.

"We go where we are invited and that does keep us out of some countries," Mr. Busch said, declining to name specific countries. The latest large African country to seek the foundation's help is the Democratic Republic of Congo, where an estimated one million blood transfusions take place every year. The foundation also recently entered Angola.

"The beauty about the blood-testing kits we supply is that they are not heat sensitive, a very important consideration in Africa where refrigeration is at a premium," Mr. Busch said.

Now that the foundation is well established in Africa, the focus is broadening to other parts of the world, especially Asia, Eastern Europe and South America.

But Mr. Busch doesn't want to dilute Africa's success by taking away any human, cash or equipment resources from the continent.

Rather, he's hoping to establish the same sort of public- and private-sector partnerships in other countries.

In China, an agreement was reached with the ministry of health and there have been tentative commitments of support from some international companies.

Following invitations to enter Brazil and Ukraine, teams have been set up to analyze the blood-screening and banking needs of both of these countries.

"We are building up the organization and its capacity so we don't hurt or weaken existing projects. There's still lots to do in Africa," Mr. Busch said.

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