

# UPTOWN NEWS

## The HIV warriors

### Patients age & chart new path

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THE statistics are eye-opening: Of the 109,000 New Yorkers living with HIV and AIDS, 40% are older than 50 – and many are residents of Central and East Harlem.

To address the unique medical and social issues of growing older with HIV, government officials, health experts and community groups are holding a public forum today at the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Center on E. 106th St.

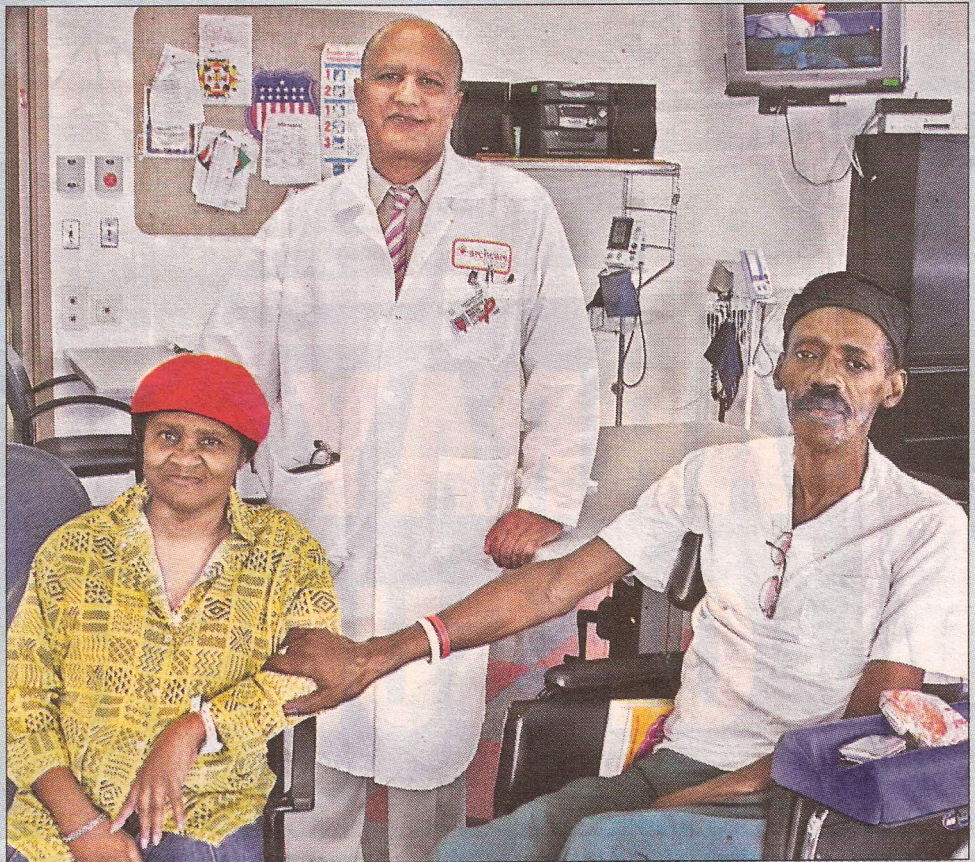
“When new HIV medicines were introduced in 1996, AIDS patients began to live longer, and with longevity comes longer term complications of HIV and the treatments – such as heart disease, certain cancers, cognitive problems and depression,” said Dr. Mekonnen Abebe, chief of AIDS Medicine at Terence Cardinal Cooke where he oversees the care of 156 HIV patients, the majority of them older people of color from uptown.

With the new generation of HIV drugs, older New Yorkers are facing medical triumphs and challenges they never imagined.

They are the warriors of HIV and AIDS, the survivors who are charting a new and unknown course as they age.

Harlem’s Robert Johnson, 67, and Dorothy Forbes, 59, understand the blessings and burdens of living with HIV all too well.

“When AIDS first came out everybody associated it with death,” said Johnson, who grew up near the Polo Grounds and



Dr. Mekonnen Abebe treats patients Dorothy Forbes, 59, and Robert Johnson, 67, at the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Center. As AIDS patients get older, they run into new health problems. Photo by Mariela Lombard

was infected more than 15 years ago.

“They made miraculous improvements with the medications,” said Johnson. If you do the right thing, you will stay alive.”

Dr. Monica Sweeney, the city’s assistant commissioner for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control, said older people often are embarrassed to seek care in their own neighborhoods, fearful they will run into people they know –

so they don’t go for checkups unless they feel very sick.

“People will go to their primary care doctor for their blood pressure and not mention they have HIV or have engaged in risky behavior like unprotected sex. And because they have gray hair on their head, their doctors don’t think to ask them,” said Sweeney.

“They don’t get offered HIV tests or get the education they need. Older people are much less

informed.”

Dorothy Forbes, a grandmother of seven, said living with HIV makes growing older a little more complicated along with her diabetes. She now uses a walker and wheelchair.

“My advice to people young and old: Be careful, and if you think you have it, have yourself checked. The thing with me is I didn’t even know I had it when I found out.”

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