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Eskom non-discriminatory recruitment policy: People with HIV / AIDS

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Case 3: Eskom non-discriminatory recruitment policy: People with HIV/AIDS ¹

Eskom is South Africa's state-owned national electricity utility. The company generates, transmits and distributes electrical power. It supplies 95 per cent of South Africa's consumption, which is more than half of all the electricity supplied on the African continent. Eskom is the fourth biggest utility in the world in terms of its installed capacity, and fifth biggest in terms of sales. Net profits for the Eskom Group in 2000 were \$227 million. The firm has approximately 33,000 employees working from more than 250 sites around the country. Most of its employees are male (86 per cent), most are aged between 30 and 49 (68 per cent), and most work in the lower job bands (60 per cent). And some of them live with HIV/AIDS.

Eskom launched its first formal HIV/AIDS policy in 1988 around the time that the first Eskom employee was diagnosed with full blown AIDS. Throughout Africa HIV/AIDS was becoming a major health concern and Eskom management recognized the need to put formal policies and programmes in place. The company policy covered education, counselling, monitoring workplace incidence of HIV/AIDS, and protection against discrimination. However, the policy also included a controversial clause that required pre-employment testing and excluded HIV positive applicants from employment. When management proposed to undertake a staff surveillance study in 1988, the unions rejected the proposal because they felt that Eskom's HIV/AIDS policy was discriminatory in that it created barriers to employment. While Eskom's initial HIV/AIDS campaign was reported to have reached 98 per cent of the workforce by 1989, the programme "was neither comprehensive nor coordinated".

Eskom began to move towards a more strategic and informed response to HIV/AIDS in the early 1990s. Senior management began to consider the long-term impact of HIV/AIDS on the workforce and the future viability of the business. Eskom's Chief Medical Officer engaged in debate with his counterparts in other organizations about discrimination and pre-employment testing. Furthermore Eskom's senior management soon realized that pre-employment testing was proving to be "self-defeating, not cost-effective and irrational" with a three-year expenditure of 200,000 rand detecting only 14 positive results from over 10,000 tests. Eskom's experience with pre-employment testing had demonstrated the futility and high cost of using this method to stop HIV/AIDS from entering the workplace.

When pre-employment testing was abandoned in 1993, the trade unions began to support the HIV/AIDS cause within Eskom. A policy review led to the development of a non-discriminatory HIV/AIDS policy, which includes education, self-awareness programmes, information sharing programmes, and care and support to the infected employees. As a result, according to the 2001 Eskom study, current prevalence of HIV among the employees is lower than the projected rate of 11 per cent. Moreover, a study commissioned by Eskom from the Harvard Institute for International Development found that the HIV/AIDS policy had a positive impact on the company's productivity.

¹ ILO, 2001c.