It is certainly my opinion that Zuma has done far more than Mbeki to set back the fight against AIDS.

Mbeki became notorious for the following quote: he said: “I don’t believe it’s a sensible thing to ask: ‘Does a virus cause a syndrome?’ It can’t. A virus will cause a disease. The syndrome is a group of diseases as a result of immune deficiency. As a result of immune deficiency you suffer various diseases.”

Now most people, myself included, have no idea what that means. The argument at the time was that by saying a virus could not cause the disease, that somehow people would act more riskily because the President queried the causes of AIDS. And if the President queried the cause of AIDS, then others would follow his example. I remember this debate extremely clearly.

But, during his Presidency, it was possible to get across the fact that unprotected sex is the primary cause of transmission. And if we want to fight AIDS, not merely treat it (which is an entirely different thing) we have to stop transmission.

President Zuma is notorious for having sexual partners outside his current marriage relationships. And the ones publicly known are the tip of the iceberg. He made world headlines when he announced that he had knowingly had unprotected sex with an HIV positive woman and had a shower afterwards to stop himself getting AIDS. And this while he was heading the Govt body (I can’t recall its exact name) that was spearheading the fight against AIDS.

Now using the Mbeki logic: if the Deputy President (and man who is spearheading the fight against AIDS) says a shower can prevent AIDS transmission, surely we can follow his example. And when news of the President’s additional relationship with Ms Khoza came to light, the multiple nature of these liaisons also came to light.

And this very graphic example of behavior that leads directly to the spread of AIDS had a far stronger “role model” impact than anything obtuse that Mbeki ever said on the subject.

So it is quite bizarre that Zuma is feted as a President who has made a contribution to the fight against AIDS. His actions have done the exact opposite, and have rendered meaningless the government’s slogan “it begins with you.”

The HSRC’s report has made it quite clear: treatment has not succeeded in bringing down transmission rates. So although it is essential to have treatment to keep people alive, (and where the DA governs, we were the FIRST to introduce comprehensive treatment and have one of the most advanced accessible models in the world -- which will continue), this has not brought down transmissions, not even in the Western Cape where they continue to increase.

Behaviour has to change, as the HSRC report makes clear. And Jacob Zuma is the poster boy for behavior that spreads HIV and AIDS.

Helen Zille