Investing in innovative technology to foster HIV voluntary testing

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Received: December 16, 2019
Accepted: December 20, 2019
Published: December 31, 2019

Cite this article as: Hartnett et al. Investing in innovative technology to foster HIV voluntary testing. *Rw. Public Health Bul. 2019; 1(3): 11-12.*

KEY MESSAGES

Investing in innovative technology to foster HIV voluntary testing is key to achieving the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets by 2020 which are 90% of people living with HIV will know their HIV status, 90% of people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive antiretroviral treatment, and 90% of people receiving antiretroviral treatment will have viral load suppression.

It is important to invest in youth-driven solutions and community-driven innovations toward ending HIV/AIDS. Placing these populations at the center of the fight address risks and vulnerabilities.

It is important to invest in innovative strategies to fight cervical cancer as a comorbidity of HIV/AIDS.

There is a need to invest in community-based health education to address stigma and discrimination related to HIV/AIDS.

INTRODUCTION

The 20th International Conference for AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA 2019), brought Africa together to discuss different innovations and ways forward in fighting sexually-related epidemics. Innovations in addressing HIV risks and vulnerabilities, new HIV infections, new treatments, and the development of a globally effective HIV vaccine were explored, as well as responses to other STIs.

It takes innovation to continue making advances in the fight against HIV/AIDS, as well as other epidemics. New innovations have made HIV testing, treatment, and care more accessible and achievable. In Rwanda, advancements in HIV include point of care testing, particularly for early infant diagnosis; pre-exposure prophylaxis; and treat all HIV positive regardless of CD4 count.

ADVANCEMENT IN HIV TESTING AND PREVENTION SERVICES

With the introduction of point of care tests, including the rapid test and a saliva swab kit, wait time for laboratory results have decreased from 14 days to a mere 15 minutes. Thus, rapidly enhancing the identification of new HIV infections.

Other recent innovations in Rwanda include the initiation of HIV self-testing to reach those particularly in rural areas, case-based surveillance and partner notification, the implementation of a referral system to improve the linkage between HIV testing and treatment services, e-based training for healthcare providers, the initiation of free condom kiosks in selected hot spots, and the promotion of voluntary medical male circumcision through campaigns to meet demand.

INNOVATION TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES

It is imperative to continue developing mechanisms and strategies to improve access to treatment and services. The challenge of stigma and discrimination remains for those affected and infected by HIV. Sensitization is key, in addition to protecting the rights of those in the workplace, school, and community. Women and adolescents remain among the most vulnerable groups, therefore gender-specific services to targets needs and vulnerabilities must be strengthened.

Building the capacity of healthcare professionals is also key to innovation. Services and trainings must be integrated into education and the scale-up of basic task shifting will enable a stronger workforce to quickly test and treat.

Challenges also remain in addressing co-morbidities. Active screening must be improved to increase diagnosis and reduce morbidity and mortality for conditions such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and cancer. A focus on women's health and investment in interventions aimed at eliminating diseases, particularly cervical cancer. In Rwanda, a new cervical cancer programme will focus on screening and treating over 70,000 adult women living with HIV/AIDS using HPV-DNA testing, and visual inspection with acetic acid while treating cervical precancerous lesions with thermoablation devices.

CONCLUSION

Innovative interventions are key to continue making progress in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In addition to scientific innovations, community-driven solutions and community-led innovation are imperative to advancements made in testing and treatment services. Through the decentralization of services, the scale-up of testing interventions, and building the capacity of the healthcare workforce, more people are able to know their status and start on life-saving treatment. Innovations in addressing co-morbidities and other epidemics are also essential to fighting global disease burden.