Background

- As a result of rapid scale up of ART over the past decade, there are now 18 million people receiving life-long care, increasing congestion in already overburdened clinics.
- Patients face significant barriers to retention including transportation, time away from work, clinic wait times, and competing life priorities.
- Differentiated care has garnered substantial attention as a solution to both decongest clinics and improve long-term retention in care.
- Extending appointment and pharmacy refill intervals in routine care—particularly up to 6 months—is a simple intervention to improve retention in care that has been under-studied and underprioritized in comparison to more resource-intensive models of differentiated care.

Methods

- **Study Population**: Stable HIV-infected patients on ART who presented for routine follow-up between January 1, 2013 – July 31, 2015 at one of 63 CIDRZ-supported clinics in Zambia
  - Stable: On ART>180 days, CD4>200 cells/μL for 6 months, No TB diagnosis in past 6 months
  - Routine Follow-Up Visits: Clinical follow-up, pharmacy visits, adhesion visits. Excluded visits with change in ART or TB evaluation only
- **Measurements**: Data on patient characteristics, clinical history, and visit history was extracted from the Zambian electronic medical record system (SmartCare). Measures of retention included:
  - **Visit Distribution**: Days to earliest scheduled clinic visit
  - **Appointment intervals on subsequent retention in care using individual visits as the unit of analysis.
- **Analysis**:
  - We performed a descriptive analysis of visit distributions and integration of clinical and pharmacy follow-up.
  - We then utilized a multilevel mixed effects logistic regression, including measures of prior retention as covariates to limit bias from confounding, to evaluate the effect of earliest scheduled return appointment intervals on subsequent retention in care using individual visits of the unit of analysis.

Results

- **Effect of Return Interval on Subsequent Retention**
  - Effect of Return Interval on Subsequent Retention
  - Days Late to Next Visit by Earliest Scheduled Return Appointment
  - **Visit Distribution**
  - Distribution of Earliest Scheduled Return Appointment

Key Findings

- **Effect of Return Interval on Subsequent Retention**
  - Days Late to Next Visit by Earliest Scheduled Return Appointment
  - **Visit Distribution**
  - Distribution of Earliest Scheduled Return Appointment

Conclusions

- There is poor integration of clinical follow-up and pharmacy refill requirements to patients to return to the clinic on a frequent basis despite longer clinical follow-up intervals.
- There is substantial heterogeneity in appointment scheduled practices at the clinic level with clinic site being an important predictor of scheduled appointment intervals.
- Extending clinic return intervals, at least up to 6 months, is associated with improved retention in care.

Implications

- Our data suggests that retention in care could be improved with extending clinical return intervals—a straightforward intervention requiring minimal additional infrastructure.
- Additional studies are needed to evaluate the role of even longer clinic return intervals (i.e. 1 year) as well as the role of longer return intervals as a strategy to improve retention in patients already suffering from poor retention.
- Further research to identify the reasons for clinic-level heterogeneity and lack of integration of clinical and pharmacy follow-up is needed.
  - Factors such as pharmacy supply-chain, clinic and pharmacy management, drug shortages and stockouts, and provider practices may be important areas for future intervention.

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Contact

Aaloke Mody, MD
Division of HIV, ID, & Global Medicine
University of California, San Francisco

aaloke.mody@ucsf.edu
995 Potrero Ave, Building 80, Ward 84
San Francisco, CA 94110

References

1. University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA
2. University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA
3. Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia
4. University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL, USA
5. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA