

1060-High Awareness but Uncertain Belief in U=U Among Providers and Couples in Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

- Sustained viral suppression resulting from antiretroviral therapy (ART) eliminates the risk of HIV transmission.
- Scientific and popular messaging has framed this elimination of risk in concepts such as treatment as prevention (TasP) and Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U).

Objective:

- We explored knowledge and acceptance of information around the elimination of HIV transmission risk with ART among health providers and HIV serodiscordant couples in Kenya

METHODS

- The Partners Scale-Up Project is evaluating PrEP delivery to HIV uninfected individuals in serodiscordant relationships in 24 public HIV clinics in Central, Western and Coast regions of Kenya.
- Between February 2017 and December 2018, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 69 health providers and 35 HIV uninfected people in serodiscordant relationships receiving PrEP services.
- Transcripts were coded using framework analysis.

RESULTS

High awareness of U=U among health providers

- Health providers reported being aware of reduced risk of HIV transmission as a result of consistent ART use and used words such as 'very low', 'minimal' and 'like zero' to describe HIV transmission risk after viral suppression.
- Their knowledge was reportedly based on the training they had received from Partners Scale-Up Project team which confirmed what some had observed in their clinical practice.

"Once you achieve viral suppression then chances of infecting the other partner is almost minimal. Also what makes me really believe in it is that we have couples who have been discordant for the rest of their life, why? Because you realize that the partner has been on ART always so their viral load is always suppressed so this other partner has never been infected." (HIV Counselor)

Counseling experiences

- Many of the providers who were knowledgeable on U=U reported providing information on U=U to HIV serodiscordant couples and found viral load results helpful when counseling clients on the 'very low risk' of HIV transmission after viral suppression.
- Providers also reported that was easier to counsel ('educate') couples on U=U when they came together to the clinic.
- They added that the concept of U=U was new to many couples and some did not believe it worked.

"We tell them that if ART is well adhered to, it suppresses the virus and therefore one cannot infect other people with the virus. Some PrEP clients however don't believe in this." (Adherence Counselor)

Awareness among HIV uninfected members in serodiscordant relationships

- Although many couples reported that they had been informed about U=U, there were still some PrEP users who reported that they and their HIV infected partners had not been informed about U=U despite their HIV infected partners being on ART for a long time.
- Even among those who reported being informed about U=U by the health providers some did not believe/trust the message.

"I don't believe because I know that he can infect me regardless of his viral load. (Short laughter)... but that other thing that he is still HIV positive and virally suppressed and just have sex with him without him infecting me with HIV, I don't believe in that." (Female PrEP User)

Deeper understanding lacking

- Some health providers believed that U=U works, but only in the context of consistent condom use while others had incorrect information with some likening the viral suppression period to the window period (where HIV transmission can occur without HIV rapid tests showing one as HIV positive).
- Health providers also expressed a need for further training to answer their 'many' questions regarding U=U.

"The person who is suppressed can still pass the dormant virus to another person and when the virus gets to the other person it will become active and thrive again because the virus doesn't die and if it gets a favorable environment it will wake up and start multiplying." (Clinical Officer)

Concerns associated with U=U

- Some health providers had reported observing clients' viral loads fluctuating even after adhering well to ART and expressed a concern that viral rebound could lead to HIV transmission.
- Others feared that communicating this message to HIV infected persons would lead them to engaging in multiple sexual relationships.
- A few providers reported avoiding counseling on U=U even after viral suppression for fear in case a seroconversion occurred they would be blamed.

"It is effective because it suppresses the virus and if the viral load is undetectable or below 1000 copies there are very minimal chances of infecting other people with HIV but sometimes we do not tell them that their chances of infecting others is minimal because some will get loose." (HIV Counselor)

Unwillingness to stop PrEP

- Even after the HIV infected partners reached viral suppression, most HIV uninfected members of couples reported unwillingness to stop PrEP while others reported that they would use condoms if they stopped PrEP.
- Others required assurance from health workers that if they stopped PrEP they would not get HIV infected (this assurance was often lacking)
- Confidence levels in U=U were higher among those who had practiced unprotected sex and had remained negative even before starting PrEP

"I would never stop taking PrEP because I am not sure of my partners HIV viral suppression." (Male PrEP User)

"she would gladly stop taking PrEP once she is told that the partner has achieved viral suppression as she trusts what the providers say." (Female PrEP User)

CONCLUSION

- Despite high awareness that effective ART use eliminates HIV transmission risk, there is both a lack of in depth knowledge and conviction among health providers and PrEP users.
- New strategies to communicate about U=U in a reliable and believable way are urgently needed.

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