# Traditional healers: a non-traditional gateway to engagement in HIV care in rural Uganda

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Misha Hooda[1], Suzanne McCluskey [2], Denis Nansera [3], Winnie Muyindike[3], Juliet Mwanga-Amumpaire[3], **Radhika Sundararajan[1]**
[1]Weill Cornell Medicine, New York, New York, [2] Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, [3]Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Mbarara Uganda

## BACKGROUND

- Only 74% of people living with HIV (PLWH) in rural Uganda are virally suppressed, which falls far short of the 95% suppression target set by UNAIDS.
- There is a need for tailored strategies to identify PLWH in rural settings and engage them in care.
- Traditional healers are trusted, informal providers in rural communities and offer a critical underutilized opportunity to identify, refer, and support disengaged PLWH.
- As part of a cluster-randomized clinical trial (NCT 05943548), we trained traditional healers to screen, test, and refer disengaged PLWH for HIV care in rural Uganda.

## METHODS

In August 2023, 54 traditional healers in Mbarara, Uganda were trained to screen for disengaged adult PLWH in their practice.

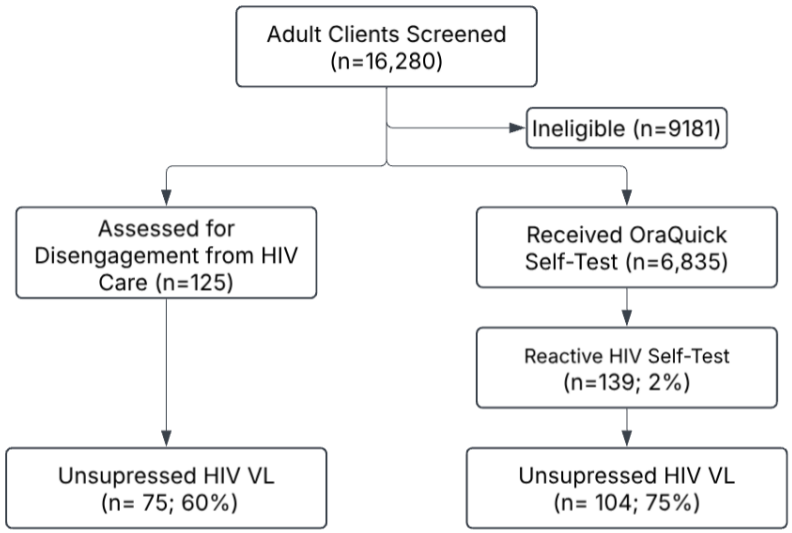
Healers used two methods to identify disengaged PLWH:

1. **Facilitating HIV self-testing f**or clients without a prior HIV diagnosis who report no prior testing in the past 12 months.
2. **ART adherence screening** using the CASE Adherence Index Questionnaire (CAIQ) for adults previously diagnosed with HIV

Clients with a reactive HIV self-test or a CAIQ score <10 underwent HIV-1 viral load (VL) measurement. We defined **disengaged with HIV care as HIV VL >200 copies/mL**. These individuals were referred to local HIV clinics for (re)initiation of care.

***Traditional healers can serve as a critical entry point for HIV testing, case identification, and re-engagement in care***

## RESULTS




**Defaulted from Care (N=125)**

| Characteristic | N (%) or median [IQR] |
|---|---|
| Male | 64 (51) |
| Age | 37 [30-42] |
| Days Since Last ART use | 255.5 [92-706] |
| Viral Load of Unsuppressed PLWH (copies/mL) | 124,263 [15,573-338,168] |

**Newly Diagnosed via Self-Test (N=139)**

| Characteristic | N (%) or median [IQR] |
|---|---|
| Male | 59 (42) |
| Age | 32 [26-40] |
| First Lifetime HIV Test at Healer | 70 (50) |
| Viral Load of Unsuppressed PLWH (copies/mL) | 127,991 [32,418-346,579] |

## CONCLUSIONS

Traditional healers can play a transformative role in reaching the last mile in HIV testing, diagnosis, and care engagement in rural Uganda. Our data suggest that:

- Healers are uniquely positioned to reach undiagnosed individuals and *those who have never been tested* for HIV.
- Healers provide care with PLWH with ART non-adherence – many of whom *have high VLs* and are at risk of HIV-related complications and contribute to onward transmission.
- Healers can *complement formal HIV services* and advance progress towards UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

1. Understanding mechanisms of viral suppression for disengaged PLWH
2. Evaluating the long-term impact of healer-facilitated engagement on adherence, retention in care, and viral suppression
3. Developing policies and procedures to formalize TH partnerships with HIV clinics, ensuring effective collaboration and ongoing training

*Partnerships with traditional healers can reshape community-based HIV interventions, improve treatment retention, and bridge the gap between traditional and biomedical healthcare systems.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for our study participants and the hard work of our outstanding Ugandan study team. This study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (R01MH132440, PI: Sundararajan).