

WHO WE ARE

# THE HIV/AIDS PROGRAMME AT WHO

## Strengthening the health sector for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care

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The World Health Organization (WHO) is part of a global effort to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS. Within the UN family — and more specifically, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) — WHO plays a particular role: strengthening the health-sector response to what continues to be one of the world's leading infectious killers.

In 2005, global leaders committed themselves to working towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010. Since then, millions of women, men and children living in countries hardest-hit by HIV/AIDS have received life-saving antiretroviral therapy (ART). Millions more have benefited from the establishment of prevention and care services delivered through the health sector.

WHO HIV/AIDS Programme staff collaborate with other UN Agencies, Ministries of Health, development agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), health-service providers, health-care institutions, people living with HIV, and other partners. The aim is to strengthen all aspects of the health sector in order to deliver much-needed HIV services. Working with six regional offices and 193 countries, WHO provides technical support and develops evidence-based norms and standards that will help transform the goal of universal access into a reality.

### UNIVERSAL ACCESS: FIVE DIRECTIONS, ONE GOAL

Recent estimates indicate that the health sector alone represents at least 55% of the resources required for the global response to HIV/AIDS. In order to better target much-needed interventions, the WHO HIV/AIDS Programme focuses on five strategic directions:

- Enable people to know their HIV status;
- Maximize the health sector's contribution to HIV prevention;
- Accelerate the scale-up of HIV treatment and care;
- Strengthen and expand health systems;
- Invest in strategic information to better inform the HIV response.

### A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

With support from more than 28 departments, the WHO HIV/AIDS Programme promotes a public health approach to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. This means working with countries to develop and implement simplified guidelines, to decentralize services, and to delegate tasks to less specialized health workers. In other words, the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

### TESTING AND COUNSELLING

Efforts to address HIV are undermined by the fact that the majority of those living with HIV are unaware of their HIV status. The WHO HIV/AIDS Programme promotes the integration of HIV testing into a broad range of services by working with partners to expand testing and counselling through advocacy, coordination, the establishment of partnerships, normative guidance and technical support to countries.

In 2007, with UNAIDS, WHO published guidelines concerning provider-initiated testing and counselling. The document defines the conditions under which health workers may routinely recommend HIV testing and counselling to patients in support of universal access. This public health strategy encourages more people to learn their HIV status while also safeguarding confidentiality and informed consent, and preserving more conventional client-initiated approaches.

### PREVENTION THROUGH THE HEALTH SECTOR

By the end of 2007, nearly three million people in low- and middle-income countries were receiving life-saving antiretroviral therapy. However, that same year, an estimated 2.5 million became newly infected with HIV. Unless prevention services are scaled up, efforts to slow and halt the impact of the pandemic will ultimately fail.

Prevention is enhanced when delivered alongside treatment and care. WHO focuses prevention efforts on evidence-based interventions targeted to at-risk populations such as sex workers and their clients, injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, prisoners and others. The Organization promotes interventions in high-prevalence regions and aims to prevent HIV transmission among vulnerable populations of young people, women, and men. It also plays a leading role in the global partnership to reduce new HIV infections among infants and young children.

WHO is supporting the scale-up of male circumcision services. Three randomized controlled trials involving thousands of men concluded that male circumcision conferred a 60% protective effect for men who had undergone the procedure. In 2007, WHO issued a manual to guide the scale-up of male circumcision services in countries characterized by low circumcision prevalence and high heterosexual HIV transmission.

WHO has also developed guidelines designed to prevent illness and the onward transmission of HIV in those living with HIV ("positive prevention"). Additionally, it closely monitors research on the development of new preventive interventions, such as HIV vaccines and microbicides, or pre-exposure prophylaxis with antiretroviral drugs.

### ACCELERATING HIV/AIDS TREATMENT AND CARE

The treatment of adults and children living with HIV is now being scaled up at a rate that could not have been foreseen 10 years ago. This is occurring in even the poorest countries with the highest HIV prevalence and is helping adults and children living with HIV to improve their quality of life and to avoid premature death.

WHO staff work with global partners to develop a comprehensive package of services, to ensure efficacy and safety, and to increase access for all in need, including marginalized populations such as injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, prisoners, sex workers and their clients.

WHO HIV/AIDS Programme staff also oversee the development, updating, and implementation of global norms and standards. They work with partners to monitor and prevent the development of antiretroviral (ARV) drug resistance, to ensure the safety of ARV medicines and to detect and respond to adverse events.

Staff also work with countries to more effectively tackle related diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and hepatitis B and C.

*Tuberculosis* is a leading cause of death for those living with HIV. The WHO HIV/AIDS Programme, in close collaboration with the WHO Stop TB Department, spearheads a global initiative to address the scourge of HIV-TB co-infection through a number of key interventions, including the implementation of the so-called 'Three Is':

- **Intensified** case finding
- **Isioniazid** preventive therapy
- **Infection** control for TB

Taken together, these interventions will go a long way towards containing the 'shadow epidemic' that could limit the impact of scaling up HIV prevention, treatment and care.

## STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING HEALTH SYSTEMS

In many high-prevalence and resource-limited settings, health systems are weak, inequitable, and unresponsive. WHO helps countries to build health system capacity and fully mobilize the health workforce for the expansion of HIV treatment and care.

## HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE

As part of the global 'Treat, Train, Retain' strategy, the WHO HIV/AIDS Programme develops and reviews policies to ensure that low-income countries retain trained health workers by, among other means, ensuring that these essential service providers are *themselves* able to access HIV prevention, treatment and care services.

WHO has also designed a range of resources to help countries plan and manage their health-sector response to HIV, including costing modules and operations manuals. The Integrated Management of Adolescent and Adult Illness (IMAI) is a WHO-initiated operational framework used in more than 30 countries. It is the Programme's main capacity-building tool designed to integrate HIV services into primary health care.

The WHO HIV/AIDS Programme co-ordinates a global network of agencies that support the procurement and supply of HIV-related medicines and commodities, with an up-to-date global database of strategic information regarding prices, regulatory status and the availability of essential medicines and diagnostics. WHO is also developing a list of priority health-care interventions to guide countries as they scale up to universal access.

## INVESTING IN STRATEGIC INFORMATION

"What gets measured gets done," said Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO, in her inaugural speech. Monitoring and assessing trends directly related to public health are core WHO functions. This includes developing and promoting standardized approaches to HIV and behavioural surveillance, and working with partners and countries to use harmonized monitoring and evaluation systems. The Organization also assists countries to report progress and, in collaboration with UNAIDS and UNICEF, publishes an annual global report that charts health-sector efforts to scale up towards universal access.

With expertise spanning all priority areas in the health-sector response to HIV/AIDS, WHO plays a leading role in the provision of technical support and guidance to countries most in need.