



U.S. Agency for
International
Development

Bureau for
Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Officials “Volunteer” Themselves To Show Public Support for Voluntary Counseling and Testing

JUST HOW IMPORTANT ARE VOLUNTARY counseling and testing for HIV care and prevention?

In Ethiopia, the mayor of Addis Ababa recently demonstrated the emphasis he places on voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) by being publicly tested on national television during the inauguration of a new HIV testing center. This specific center is supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is one of 26 public sector VCT services in Addis Ababa supported by the U.S. Government.

Family Health International, with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) under the IMPACT Project, supports 25 of these public sector VCT sites. Launched in January 2003, the VCT initiative has already served more than 14,000 people throughout the capital.

Ambassador Randall Tobias, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, emphasized how important it is that people know their HIV status as the first step in responding to HIV/AIDS. Ambassador Tobias dramatized his support for the project by being tested at the Organization for Social Services for AIDS during his April 2004 visit to Addis Ababa.

Research shows voluntary counseling and testing to be a cost-effective strategy for facilitating behavior change and an important component of a comprehensive HIV/AIDS program.

U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Aurelia Brazeal recognized the Family Health International initiative in a speech given during a VCT promotion campaign in May 2004. She noted that, “...the integration of voluntary counseling and testing into the continuum of prevention, care, and treatment has...succeeded in improving the quality of [AIDS] services.”

Research shows voluntary counseling and testing to be a cost-effective strategy for facilitating behavior change and an important component of a comprehensive HIV/AIDS program. Testing provides an entry to other HIV/AIDS services, including prevention of mother-to-child transmission, clinical management of related illnesses, access to antiretroviral therapy, and psychological and legal support. Counseling and testing sharpen people’s perception of their vulnerability to HIV and help reduce the stigma surrounding the condition.

Family Health International began its intervention by visiting health centers in the capital to assess infrastructure, staffing, and logistics. Testing requires, at a minimum, test kit supplies and related materials, a private room for voluntary



Photo by Marie Hernandez, courtesy of Family Health International.

Ambassador Randall Tobias joins Dr. Eyob Kamil (center), Head of the Addis Ababa Health Bureau, and the staff of the Addis Ketema Public Health Center in celebrating the success of the voluntary counseling and testing initiative.

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counseling and testing, a waiting area, and a working refrigerator. Two counselors, one peer supervisor, and two laboratory technicians needed to be trained at each center. Family Health International also trained supervisors from the Addis Ababa Health Bureau who visit each site regularly to ensure ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Three data clerks were trained to manage voluntary counseling and testing data from all the centers.

Other VCT activities under the IMPACT Project include the establishment of post-test clubs to help individuals cope with their HIV status. A support group involving more than 80 counselors from the public and private sectors and nongovernmental organizations has also been formed to provide peer support to reduce burn-out, coordinate technical assistance, establish quality control systems, and standardize counselor training in the region.

A campaign for Compassion, Tolerance, and Sensitivity, launched on World AIDS Day in December 2003 under the theme "Let's talk about what we do and do what we talk" (translated from Amharic), supports IMPACT's voluntary counseling and testing initiative by creating a more supportive environment for its effective implementation. Plans for integration of VCT centers into the standard package of services at the health-center level in other areas of the country, including Oromia and Amhara, are also underway.

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