

*OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF NEW START CENTRES AT CNN
AND BERNARD NORDKAMP CENTRE/CAA*

TOPIC:

The Benefits of Knowing Your HIV Status

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Director of Proceedings, Mr. Neville Basson

Right Honourable Prime Minister of the Republic of Namibia, Mr. Theoben Gurirab and Madam Guriras

Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament Present,

His Excellency, the Ambassador of the European Commissions, Mr. Antonius Brueser

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

SMA Country Representative – Ms. Sue Holland

Members of the media, Colleagues and Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Lironga Eparu – National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Namibia, It is a privilege for me to be here today. This morning demonstrates that we are no longer willing to stand back and let the HIV epidemic take its course. We are with you to take a stand against the most devastating epidemic this continent has ever faced.

I have been asked to speak today on the Benefits of Knowing your HIV status, from the perspective of a Person Living with HIV. I would therefore like to start by saying “that we are all HIV+ until proven HIV- by a test result”.

Knowledge and zero status through testing and counselling is the key entry points to prevention services in populations at risk and to care and support for persons living with HIV and AIDS. Knowing that one is HIV infected is a pre-requisite to accessing HIV care and support services. Knowing ones HIV infection status strengthens prevention efforts, encourages infected persons like myself, to avoid ongoing transmission to others, and motivates

those who are uninfected to remain so through risk education strategies. HIV testing and counselling can lead to a reduction in the number of sexual partners, increased condom use, fewer sexually transmitted infections, and safe injecting practices.

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is a reality that people often ask the following questions:

WHY SHOULD I BE TESTED?

Testing has the following visible benefits:

- * Knowing your HIV status places you in the position to monitor your immune system and early treatment can greatly improve your long term health.
- * Knowing you are HIV+ may help you change behaviours that would put yourself and others at risk
- * You will know whether or not you can infect others
- * Women and their partners considering pregnancy can take advantage of treatments that potentially prevents transmission of HIV to the baby.
- * If you test negative, you may feel less anxious after testing.

Allow me now to briefly share with you my one experience of learning about my HIV status. The time that I was tested for HIV, no VCT centres were available and I underwent for my test with a psychologist. One would think that these medical professional would know what the important issues are that needs to be shared with a patient who goes for HIV testing. However, this psychologist did not deem it important to give me pre-test counselling, or post test counselling. She simply told me my results and told me to eat healthy food.

This diagnoses brought anger all over me and I decided that I would not die alone. If I should be very honest today, I went on a serious killing spree. I knowing had sex with multiple partners with the intention on infecting these people. I can be called a mass murderer. This all because effective pre and post test counselling were not done.

Yes, I am not ashamed for having done that, simply because I was not guided to deal with my emotions and frustration, to deal with my anger and denial. And I can assure you that many more people went through this very same stage.

It is with this being said that VCT Centres staff should know, as much as we appreciate the service being made available to people. You need to ensure that effective counselling is given to all these people, and to ensure that these people are immediately connected to support groups of PLWHA.

Lironga Eparu has experienced people coming to our offices, being confused, contemplating of death and being frightened of dying. These were people that have undergone their HIV test at various places, including VCT centres. They come to us simply because they need to speak to a person that would understand the fears, frustration and other issues that goes along with confirming your HIV status.

Another reality is that yet up to know, a lot of people don't want to go for HIV testing. This is simply because Stigma and Discrimination has become a epidemic of its own, and needs to be addressed, redressed and arrested by all stakeholders involved. We know and we have been told that by many that they will not enter any VCT sites, simply because these sites are stigmatized. People still believe that should I go into this centre that people will believe that I am HIV+.

Education is therefore very important and needs to be continued with more aggression and revised strategies.

In conclusion, VCT centres can make a huge difference in addressing HIV in Namibia and on behalf of people living with HIV/AIDS we wish you all the best for the future.

“Together we can make it”