Integrating Partner Notification Services into PMTCT (Option B+) services in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon

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BACKGROUND
- Partner notification (PN) for control of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is a public health strategy which notifies the partners of infected individuals of their possible exposure to disease.
- PN has rarely been used in sub-Saharan Africa as an HIV prevention intervention.
- In Cameroon, patients newly diagnosed with HIV do not usually receive assistance in notifying their sex partners leading to low partner disclosure and poor partner involvement in PMTCT.
- In 2012, the World Health Organization issued new guidelines in PMTCT including Option B+ which recommends that all HIV positive pregnant women (PW) be placed on antiretroviral treatment for life irrespective of CD4 count.
- PN was integrated into PMTCT at 22 pilot Option B+ sites as a strategy to increase male partner disclosure, notification, testing and linkage to care.

METHODS
- From January 1014 to June 2015 (18 months), Trained Health Advisors (HA) at the 22 B+ sites interviewed consenting HIV-positive PW about their sexual partners in the last two years and facilitated disclosure or confidentially informed their partners that they had been exposed to HIV.
- The Health Advisors pre-test counseled the partners and offered HIV testing in the clinic, their home or other location of their choice.
- They then educated both index cases and their partners on HIV prevention, risk reduction and linked all HIV positive partners to care and treatment services.

RESULTS
- During the 18 months, uptake was monitored monthly and 1,350 PW tested HIV positive at the 22 option B+ sites (Figure 1).
- Of the 1,323 partners they identified, 1,243(92%) were traced and notified of their exposure to HIV.
- Of the 1,243 notified, 730(59%) did their HIV test and received results.
- A total of 193(26.0%) of those tested were HIV positive and 191(99%) were linked to appropriate C&T services.
- HIV negative partners (74% of those tested) were counseled on risk reduction and the importance of staying HIV negative.
- Male partner involvement increased greatly at seven of ten sites monitored (Figure 2).

LIMITATIONS
- The number of contacts reported suggests that most women have just one partner. This could also mean that the women did not disclose all their partners for fear of being looked upon as being unfaithful.
- Over 20% of the contacts notified did not receive testing from PN services. We were not able to collect information for those who did their tests in sites not offering PN services. Those partners may have been reluctant to have the HIV test for fear of having a positive result.
- Some women did not want their partners notified because they fear of abandonment.

CONCLUSIONS
- PN is a feasible HIV prevention strategy in resource-limited settings which can identify and test many partners of HIV positive PW. PN can be integrated into Option B+ PMTCT programs to identify HIV positive partners who are placed on treatment alongside the HIV positive PW.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting organizations.

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