

Hope alive for adolescents with perinatally acquired Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

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BACKGROUND

The introduction of antiretroviral medicines in mid-2003 in Ghana significantly¹ challenged the paradigm of the progression of HIV to AIDS. The disease which was seen as immediate gateway to death suddenly became a chronic condition like any other chronic condition such as hypertension and diabetes.²

Without HIV, the adolescents' age group is bereft with many challenges such as identity with themselves and others, relationships, sexuality, drug use, feeling of independence from parents and so forth.³ HIV infection has an added-on effect with disclosure⁴ challenges at home and school, stigmatization⁵, drug adherence⁶, psychosocial issues⁷ and so forth.

In Ghana over 35,000 children and adolescents are living with HIV mainly from mother-to-child-transmission (MCT) ¹. Over 190 adolescents are registered in care at the Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital. The clinic fills in from the pediatric clinic which actively transfers children who are past their 12th birthday to the adolescents' clinic.

CHALLENGES

Challenges identified in the adolescents' HIV clinic can be classified into Health, School, and Home. Health related challenges include Lifelong medication, regular laboratory tests, frequent hospital visits, psychological trauma, and stunted growth. School related challenges includes learning under drug side effects, fixed medication time, pills (tablets) having to be taken after food all the time, regular absenteeism, and poor disclosure to school authorities. Home related challenges include poor external family support, dead or sick parents from HIV, only child living with HIV in family, poor disclosure from stigma, and extra burden on low income family.

INTERVENTIONS

Some of the innovations introduced in the clinic include the "Annual Award ceremony" where adolescents with clinical and laboratory evidence of adherence are awarded for their effort with laptops, phones, stationery and so forth. Also "back-to-school" event is held a week before schools re-open where exercise books, pens, and other school related equipment are distributed to adolescents. Kindhearted Ghanaian adults have adopted some of the adolescents living with HIV (especially orphans) to support them physically and emotionally. Adolescents also belong to peer-groups. Group members are determined by day of visit. The cohort formed chooses their leader and clinic visit day by majority decision. During waiting time, these adolescents engage in sharing experiences on how challenges with adherence are managed by members.

Management board made of diverse professional background meet with elected leaders of their social group to plan their activities including funds-raising events to support their care. There is HOPE for the future.

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