



PMTCT PROGRAMME NEEDS MORE MUSCLE



Christine Varga

A recent study by the HIV/AIDS Directorate has concluded that one factor that could decisively influence the success of the national PMTCT programme is...wait for it...men!

The seven-month study was conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council's chief research specialist in the child, youth and family development programme, Christine Varga, and was backed by UNICEF.

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Varga worked in the catchment communities of the Siloam and Mankweng pilot sites in Limpopo to identify factors that could improve implementation and efficacy of the infant feeding, care and community mobilisation programmes.

The Durban-based anthropologist concluded that male involvement - from the initial counselling and testing session through to negotiation of condoms in post-partum sex - had the

potential to empower women.

Men's participation would help ensure that women stuck to PMTCT recommendations and keep their infants safe from vertical transmission, but also prevented re-infection in themselves and partners. They could influence both the index pregnancy and help prevent vertical transmission in subsequent pregnancies.

'If men were to be involved from the beginning, it would be a completely different story for a woman and her ability to keep herself safe after delivery', Varga said.



Male involvement:

- encouraged women to test and to collect their results;
- created a supportive home environment for women and children living with HIV/AIDS and helped them successfully disclose their status to in-laws and other relatives;
- helped ensure that infants were fed in the safest way to prevent post-

partum vertical transmission; and

- encouraged partners of HIV-positive women to be tested.

'This illustrates the profound effect that partner support and involvement can have on the success and effectiveness of voluntary counseling and testing and on infant feeding regimens', Varga enthused.

Beyond the PMTCT programme, active male participation ensured open communication about sexual and reproductive matters and helped ensure post-partum use of condoms.

Varga said men were vital in influencing community norms surrounding the treatment of HIV-positive people and they could play a major role in reducing stigma.

The study found that male awareness and understanding of HIV/AIDS-related facts varied, in some cases lacking 'basic information and knowledge'.

Study participants identified several strategies to increase male involvement, which would be fed into the UNICEF community mobilisation strategy. These included:

- informal talks and educational sessions at shebeens and church functions after Sunday services;
- getting tribal officials and key community stakeholders to sanction PMTCT-related information campaigns;
- expanding awareness and counselling activities beyond antenatal facilities to encourage men to think about PMTCT as 'more than just women's or children's issues'; and
- encouraging men to become active as community mobilisers on health and PMTCT issues and as volunteer health educators.

Chris Bateman