

STRENGTHENING UGANDA'S SYSTEMS FOR TREATING AIDS NATIONALLY

~ SUCCESS STORY ~

Intensive Adherence Counselling Gives Clients at Orum HC IV a Second Chance; Okwany's Experience

Uganda adopted HIV viral load monitoring as the gold standard for measuring the efficacy of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in HIV positive clients.¹ The main goal of ART is to achieve viral suppression, which is in line with the 3rd 90 of the UNAIDS 90-90-90 strategy. Good adherence to ART is key for sustained HIV viral suppression, reduced risk of drug resistance, improved quality of life and survival as well as decreased risk of HIV transmission. Conversely, poor adherence is a major cause of treatment failure.

To ensure that all HIV positive clients on antiretroviral therapy achieve viral suppression, intensive adherence counseling (IAC) was introduced through mentorships to Orum Health Centre (HC) IV by the USAID/ASSIST project in October 2016, to support clients who have issues adhering to ART. The goal of IAC is to provide clients with a comprehensive plan for adhering to their ARVs; by identifying barriers to their adherence and exploring possible ways to overcome those barriers. The ART Clinic team at Orum HC IV tracks all patients enrolled in HIV care using the appointment book to ensure they access viral load tests. Clients with non-suppressed viral loads are contacted by phone



Okwany in an IAC session at Orum HC IV

or physically followed-up by the linkage facilitator. When they return to the facility, they are advised on the meaning of their viral load results and why they need to start IAC to improve their adherence and achieve viral suppression. The facility offers a separate clinic day for non-suppressed clients to ensure they receive one-on-one IAC sessions.

Okwany—a 56-year-old client receives HIV care services at Orum HC IV. He tested HIV positive in 2011 and enrolled on ART in June of the same year. His viral load tests in August 2015 and August 2016 showed continued lack of suppression; indicating a need

for an intervention to help him adhere to his treatment and stay on 1st line ART. As a retired teacher and peasant farmer, Okwany was spending a lot of his time drinking at a local bar; leaving little thought to managing his HIV treatment.

"I wanted to be suppressed, but at the time I was not taking my adherence seriously. I would go to the bar and forget to take my pills." said Okwany.

Through USAID/SUSTAIN's continued support to Orum HC IV's ART Clinic—Okwany was enrolled in the streamlined IAC for non-suppressed clients. He was counseled on the importance of taking his ARVs, benefits of viral suppression, dose timing and nutrition.

Denis (ART Clinic In-charge at Orum HC IV) assisted Okwany in developing an adherence plan that was tracked by monitoring his pill count. He noted that despite two IAC sessions, Okwany was not taking his medicines and therefore did not qualify to have a repeat viral load test until he adhered to his treatment.

Denis says, "I did not want to give up on him, so I kept counselling him to focus on his adherence and get better"

The national guidelines require that a patient have three consecutive good

¹ Revised consolidated guidelines for prevention and treatment of HIV in Uganda

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adherence assessment scores during the three months of IAC. It was only after the two IAC sessions that Okwany reduced his alcohol intake and started adhering to his medication and regularly attending IAC sessions and therefore qualified for a repeat viral load test. The viral load test done in May 2017 indicated that Okwany had finally achieved viral suppression.

Okwany's overall health improved following IAC. He even advises other HIV positive individuals in the community to adhere to their drug regimens

"I thought if I can suppress this virus—then I want to help others do the same—I'm not afraid to talk to them about it," Okwany says.

The USAID/SUSTAIN project in partnership with Uganda's Ministry of Health hired a counsellor at Orum HC IV to ensure IAC is available to more clients and for home visits to be conducted to assess clients' well-being and make sure they feel supported by their families to adhere to their ARVs.



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