



ROUTINE VIRAL LOAD TESTING IS ESSENTIAL

It can improve health outcomes and reduce the spread of HIV. Yet, it is not available at this health facility.

The UNAIDS set the so-called “90-90-90 treatment targets” that are to be adopted by countries; to diagnose 90% of all people with HIV, provide antiretroviral therapy (ART) for 90% of those diagnosed, and achieve viral suppression for 90% of those on treatment by 2020.

Recommended in the 2013 and 2015 World Health Organization (WHO) antiretroviral treatment guidelines, viral load testing measures the amount of HIV in the blood, and indicates if a treatment regimen is working or not. The WHO recommends viral load monitoring six months after starting ART, and **routinely** every year thereafter.

IT IS ESSENTIAL – BUT THE TEST IS NOT HAPPENING RIGHT NOW

A short survey was undertaken by community research teams in 12 African countries looking at the current use of routine viral load testing and implementation barriers as described by policy makers (Ministry of Health, National AIDS Councils), service providers (doctors, nurses, community health workers), recipients of treatment and care (people living with HIV, including key populations, adolescents, and others) and representatives of non-governmental organizations. Results showed that viral load monitoring is not routinely done in nine out of 11 countries surveyed. Other findings include:

- a lack of awareness amongst health practitioners and people living with HIV about the importance and availability of routine viral load monitoring;
- Viral load tests are often not available in HIV clinics;
- The price of viral load tests (ranges from US\$20-US\$85 throughout Africa) is prohibitive for most citizens;
- The equipment for monitoring viral load is not maintained adequately;
- The consumables like reagents and other products needed to run the tests often run out because of poor planning and re-stocking procedures.

Viral load testing already represents the normal standard of care for people living with HIV in wealthy countries, and examples of best practices demonstrate that scale-up is realistic in low- and middle-income countries. Viral load testing requires a shift in thinking, as health workers and patients adopt a different and better way of monitoring treatment. Education and training are essential at every step, from training of laboratory staff, clinicians and adherence counselors, to the education of people living with HIV to understand what their viral load result means and when they should be asking for a viral load test.

Achieving viral suppression among 90% of those on treatment will require greatly expanding the availability and use of *routine viral load testing*.

Every person living with HIV has a right to information, to health and to life. It is my right and that of others to know our viral load status. Routine viral load monitoring will improve health outcomes and reduce the spread of HIV. Access to routine viral load tests will contribute to having a healthy and productive nation.

TAKE ACTION NOW

People living with HIV need to be given effective treatment now. We urgently call on health facilities and HIV clinics to:

1. Embrace the WHO 2015 HIV treatment guidelines on the use of routine viral load tests;
2. Advocate for further and regular training on the use of viral load tests;
3. Ensure the participation of PLHIV and communities affected by HIV in planning and implementation of routine viral load test rollout;
4. Be diligent in the process of procuring and use of equipment and consumables of viral load tests;
5. Treat people living with HIV with respect and the dignity they deserve.

IT CAN BE DONE

We believe that it is medically important and operationally feasible to implement routine viral load monitoring in developing countries. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has demonstrated in eight projects across seven countries how existing models of care can be adapted for routine viral load monitoring. Their Access Campaign's *HIV: Undetectable* reports are designed to equip health workers with information about the products and operational strategies needed to help scale-up viral load monitoring, including training and implementation tools. For more information, see www.knowyourviralload.org