

Covid-19 threatens gains made in HIV/Aids fight

By  Katja Hamilton

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7.1 million people are living with HIV and don't know it. 38 million people know their HIV status and are living with the disease every day. Of these 59% of people are on treatment. This narrative needs to change.



Source: [Pexels](#)

"We need to raise awareness of early diagnostic testing," said Ida Mbuthia medical and scientific affairs lead, Roche Diagnostics. She was speaking at an expert-led panel discussion led by Jennifer Lotito, president and chief operating officer at RED this week.

The take-home message: Covid-19 is placing a strain on existing diagnostics systems for HIV/Aids and threatening to unhinge the world's efforts to end AIDS by 2030.

With Covid-19 cases spiking again in many African countries, we need to invest in public and private partnerships in driving access to sustainable and reliable quality testing for HIV and Aids as a matter of urgency, Lotito said.

Lotito generates critical and sustainable funding and awareness to help end the Aids and now Covid pandemic. She drives the successful relationships with (RED) partner brands including Apple, Bank of America, Beats by Dre, LVMH, Salesforce, Starbucks and others — brands that have helped generate over \$650m for the Global Fund, impacting over 220 million lives.

Fighting multiple pandemics

"The value of early diagnostics in fighting pandemics like HIV/Aids cannot be underestimated, because the fight against Covid-19 is also the fight against HIV/Aids. And yet the spread of Covid-19 continues to threaten the gains made in the HIV/Aids fight requiring health systems to respond to multiple pandemics at once," Lotito said.

Akanmu Alani Sulaimon, professor of haematology and transfusion medicine, University of Lagos said unless there was adequate early HIV diagnostics, it would be near impossible to deliver the antiretroviral therapy (ART) necessary to people living with the virus, so as to prevent the virus's transmission to others.

Covid stigmatisation challenge

He said people's fears of contracting Covid-19 in a clinical setting, where there was poor social distancing, were prohibiting them from getting tested for HIV. He said this was complicated by Covid stigmatisation.

Health workers - afraid of contracting Covid-19 - are found to be averse to touching patients presenting for an HIV test. This is more so among those presenting with Covid-19 positive symptoms. There was also a need to expedite Covid-19 test results, he said, as patients were having to wait 72 hours for a turnaround.

The panel stressed that the impact of Covid-19 could reverse decades of progress in the fight against HIV/Aids. Compared to 2019, statistics from April to September 2020 show that global HIV testing fell by 41%.

HIV infections rise

With help from partners, many countries were able to contain Covid-19 in the early days. While diagnostic testing was there to respond to a new pandemic, Covid-19 placed a strain on existing systems for HIV and TB testing. By December 2020 more than 26.5 million Covid-19 tests had been conducted across Africa and over 2.5 million cases of Covid-19 detected.

Studies predict the impact of Covid-19 could cause up to 148,000 additional Aids-related deaths and up to 293,000 additional new HIV infections by 2022.

Says Lotito: "We've seen such incredible progress in the fight against HIV over the last 30 years, but with progress comes complacency. Covid has all but sucked the oxygen out of the room. We can't forget the progress we've made on HIV and diagnostics, because until all of us are safe, we're all in danger."

"The fight against HIV has to be looked at through a global lens."

She was speaking of the need for businesses to be proactive in fighting these pandemics. "It's our job to get companies to care, so that businesses can continue to grow. They need to find new ways of engaging with employees."

UNAids target

Mbuthia added that The Global Fund partnership has scaled up its testing from conducting 2 million tests in 2014 to conducting 20 million tests at the end of 2020.

"We are proud to be able to bring affordable testing to low to middle-income countries in light of the UNAids' target of 95-95-95 [aiming to end the Aids epidemic by 2030]. The aim is to have 95% of those living with HIV know their HIV status; 95% of those diagnosed being on antiretroviral treatment; and, of people on treatment, to have 95% virally suppressed."

"We need a multi-pronged approach to treatment of these diseases, bringing stakeholders together," said Sulaimon. "With collaboration patients can use the information and education to support other family members."

"The lessons used in dealing with one pandemic can be used to address the needs of another."

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

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