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Book of Abstracts

Theme:

Harnessing Health care Quality and Innovation to Build Resilient, High Impact Healthcare System

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Spiritual Healing Center on Re-Engagement of People Living with HIV to Care and Treatment: The Case of Yirgalem Estinfase Kirstos Church Healing Center

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Background/Problem Statement: As Ethiopia inches closer to attaining the 95-95-95 targets for treatment coverage and reaching epidemic control. Major programmatic challenges are adherence to care and treatment, and progress towards growing the treatment cohort. Despite high levels of viral suppression, there is a core group of approximately 14 percent of ART clients who are not virally suppressed, that are attributable to poor adherence (EPHI, 2019). Factors that affect retention and adherence to ART are multifaceted. Available data indicate that a percentage of individuals who default on ART demonstrate competition between ART and religious beliefs. Additionally, available data reveal that those who interrupted treatment expressed societal pressure to conform to religious beliefs, such as reliance on holy water and other forms of spiritual therapy. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have a unique connection to their communities and understand how local cultures affect health care use and health-seeking behavior.

Summary of the Innovation: MENA and IRCE, funded by U.S. Foreign Assistance, initiated a comprehensive training program for spiritual healers from diverse religious sects to equip them with the knowledge and skills to address challenges to adherence to ART care and treatment. Among the trainees was a respected spiritual father from Yirgalem Estinfase Kirstos Church Healing Center. After completing the training, the spiritual father began engaging worshippers in candid discussions about their HIV serostatus during the 'Tebal' spiritual healing sessions. This approach helped build trust and encouraged transparency among worshippers, many of whom initially withheld their HIV status but trusted the spiritual father. To support this process, IRCE developed a documentation tool to systematically record client demographics, health status, and the nature of their participation in the healing process. Seventeen clients who had previously interrupted their antiretroviral therapy (ART) were successfully re-engaged with local health facilities.

Beyond individual consultations, the spiritual father actively participated in regular review meetings and project workshops. These forums provided opportunities to share experiences, address challenges, and refine strategies, enhancing the overall health impact within the community.

Potential impact of the Innovation: The innovation highlights the impact of integrating local spiritual beliefs and practices into public health interventions. By involving faith-based organizations, the initiative effectively reached populations that were previously resistant to healthcare, including those who had interrupted ART, thereby improving health outcomes and fostering a collective sense of responsibility and community engagement in health.

Piloting and Scaling Strategy: The program should be expanded to other spiritual healing centers across the regions, including Addis Ababa, by training more spiritual healers and fostering partnerships between spiritual centers and healthcare facilities to reach a broader population. Continuous monitoring of the approach on ART re-engagement, treatment outcomes, and community attitudes, allowing ongoing enrichment of the approach, is important

Resourcing: Ensuring funding through engagement with faith-based organizations, local governments, and international donors is crucial for the program's long-term success.

Sustainability: To sustain this innovation, advocacy for policies that support the integration of spiritual and traditional healing with healthcare needs to be promoted with culturally sensitive public health strategies. Moreover, engage faith-based organizations in regular performance review meetings, consultative workshops. Furthermore, consider developing a curriculum for spiritual healers to standardize training that has public health importance, including HIV/AIDs and TB.