

## PERSPECTIVES

# The advent of HIV self-testing in Zambia

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Globally, an estimated 60% of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) - infected individuals remains untested and unaware of their sero-status [1]. Access to testing remains an issue in many regions and fear of stigmatization and discrimination continues to threaten acceptance of HIV testing services worldwide [2]. The overall goal of the HIV Self-Testing Africa (STAR) Project was to improve access to HIV testing via a simple HIV self-testing (HIVST) procedure using OraQuick [STAR Project] device in high burden African Countries, Zambia being one such Country. The Project is another attempt to bridge the gap created by an estimated 19 million people world-wide living with HIV but being unaware that they are. The grave consequences are obviously that such untested individuals neither can seek treatment for ailments consequent to being HIV positive nor make conscious choices to engage in prevention behaviors against causing harm to self and/all others.

### Introduction

Even with advancements in providing access to HIV testing services, approximately 40% of Zambians have never tested for HIV. Zambia was fortunate to have been selected for the pilot project whereby UNITAID/Population Services International (PSI) (UNITAID-PSI) invested \$23 million in three Countries, others being Malawi and Zimbabwe. The pilot involves distribution of nearly 750,000 test kits and modeling self – testing among the population. In Zambia, the catchment comprises the high-risk age group of 16 to 45-year-olds – the segment of the population known to be most vulnerable to HIV transmission.

### Rationale

Improved access to HIV testing is foreseen to have huge potential to impact HIV prevention, care and treatment goals. It is also hoped that at the end of the current first phase of the STAR Project in Zambian 4 districts of Ndola, Central Province (Kapiri Urban and Kapiri Rural), Lusaka and Choma will result in other emerging evidence, will inform World Health Organization (WHO) normative guidance and support the establishment of appropriate policy. Further, it is believed that, this ongoing first phase will generate vital information about how to distribute self-test products effectively, ethically and efficiently, with adequate post-test support services.

### Benefits to HIV Self-Testers

STAR Project research studies in Zambia and Malawi since 2016 reveal that the OraQuick device is easy to use, provides an alternative for people concerned about intimacy and confidentiality, and gives individuals control of when and where to test. It is further suggested that, men and young people were thought to be particularly likely to benefit from a provision of HIV testing away from health facilities – spaces associated with women’s health-seeking behavior [3].

### Concerns

Although no substantial social harms have been recorded across the regions in Zambia, lack of counseling prior to receiving HIVST kit, post-test counseling, ensuring linkage to additional services and linkage to care remains a challenge. The potential for coercive use of self-testing devices and doubt in their accuracy remains too a source of lack of self-linkage to additional services by majority self-testers. Due to combination of a myriad of socio-economic resulting in everyday dominance of men over women in the community, men may coerce their female partners into testing. Discordant results within a couple might result in arguments or violence – especially if they had not linked to receive additional counseling. People getting reactive results might be unlikely to seek confirmatory tests or link themselves to medical care due to reasons related to fear of stigma and discrimination.

## **Conclusion**

An enhanced follow-up system of clients that will involve enquiring about test results via mobile phone technologies, asking about harms and measuring linkage to care by skilled psychosocial counselors need to be considered as the future of ongoing emotional support to HIV self-testers. Given the target population that includes 16 up to 20 years old might be too young to handle emotional pressure that will come along coping with HIV reactive results and if left unchecked could result in increased substance abuse and difficulties to excel in areas of life such academics. HIVST can be the future of Zambian citizens coming to a point of realization that owning one's health is essential for quality of life and value added for positive, productive and healthier lives.

## **References**

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