

EXPERTS SAY SPECIAL INTERVENTIONS NEEDED AS HEALTH WORKERS DO NOT UNDERSTAND SIGN LANGUAGE

By Taddeo Bwambale

Four out of every 10 people with a hearing impairment in Uganda know nothing about HIV/AIDS or its transmission, a new study has shown, pointing to key hurdles in access to information about the infection for persons with disabilities.

The study conducted by Makerere University School of Public Health, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the health ministry, shows that up to 40% of people with hearing impairment lack any knowledge about HIV/AIDS.

Uganda has more than one million people who are either profoundly deaf (suffer total hearing loss) or partially deaf. Experts say the group will require special interventions in the fight against HIV.

The 2017 Crane Survey Report unveiled yesterday shows that without reaching key vulnerable groups, Uganda will find it hard to meet the global target to end the AIDS epidemic by 2020.

While the overall HIV prevalence rate among the deaf (1.9%) remains far below the average for the general population (6.4%), the survey shows that risky encounters expose the group to infection.

Forced into sex

Almost half (45%) of the deaf said they have been coerced into sexual intercourse, while 20.2% have been raped in the last 12 months. About 16.5% have bought sex while 26.2% have engaged in sex for money.

A total of 1,011 deaf people were interviewed during the study carried out between February 2014 and 2015 in Kampala. Most of those who are sexually active confessed they have never used contraceptives.

Presenting the report, Dr Geoffrey Musinguzi, a researcher at Makerere University, said the findings lend credence to calls for special interventions on HIV targeting persons with disabilities.

"Two-thirds of the deaf say they find it difficult or very difficult to access health services due to costs and communication gaps. Medical personnel cannot interpret sign language," Musinguzi said.

Although the deaf tend to rely on

Deaf Ugandans ignorant about HIV transmission, says report



Researchers from Makerere University Herbert Kiyingi and Wolfgang Hladik interacting during the dissemination of research findings in Kampala yesterday. Photo by Godiver Asege

friends and relatives for support, common messages related to HIV are often lost or misconstrued, Rebecca Nantondo, an official at Reach a Hand Uganda, said.

"Recently, someone tested HIV positive and the interpreter translated the message to mean that it was a clean bill of health. Such complexities can affect the response," Nantondo added.

She advised the research institutions to make referrals to care centres a

strategic component in future studies, so that those who test positive for HIV know where to seek services.

High-risk groups

Another report on HIV released at the same event shows that key groups remain at increased risk of HIV transmission and require special attention for Uganda to tame the scourge.

The report shows HIV prevalence

remains highest among female sex workers at 31%, people with multiple partners (25%), people who use drugs (17%) and refugees (6.1%).

A higher prevalence of HIV was also found among transgender women (20%) and men who sleep with men (12.7%). Dr Herbert Kiyingi, a researcher, called for an all-embracing approach in the HIV fight.

"We can no longer ignore anyone if we want to meet our targets on

BETWEEN THE LINES:

■ A total of 1,011 deaf people were interviewed during the study carried out between February 2014 and 2015 in Kampala. Most of those who are sexually active confessed they have never used contraceptives. Almost half (45%) of the deaf said they have been coerced into sex.

HIV because the high-risk group interacts with the general population on a daily basis," Kiyingi said.

Dr Patrick Tumusiime, the commissioner for disease control at the health ministry, said the findings were a sign that services were not reaching target populations.

"I feel guilty that our interventions in key areas are still inadequate. It shows that we need to step up prevention," he said.

"As leaders, we need to separate our personal or religious beliefs from public health work to ensure that no one is left behind," he added.

Tumusiime promised that the ministry would use some of the findings for planning.

Dr Rhoda Wanyenze, the director of Makerere School of Public Health, said the studies highlight the need to revise the packaging and coverage of HIV interventions.

About 1.6 million people are living with HIV in Uganda. HIV prevalence has been declining over the last four years, largely due to a drop in new infections and an intense campaign against HIV.

Health ministry statistics show that new infections dropped to 99,000 cases in 2014, down from 140,000 recorded in 2013.