

Experts caution on new oral HIV self-testing kit

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KAMPALA. The plan by government to introduce an oral HIV/Aids self-testing kit has provoked a mixed bag of reactions from counselling experts, issuing warnings about its application in homes.

In an interview with *Daily Monitor* yesterday, Ms Florence Namuli, a study counselor at Baylor College Uganda, said without pre-testing and post-test counselling, the outcomes of the self-testing could break down families and relationships.

"You might find when the man is not prepared to receive the results and this can result into terrible consequences like a breakdown in the relationship for partners who are cohabiting or married," Ms Namuli said.

However, Mr Crescent Mwebaze, the emergency response coordinator at Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation Uganda, welcomed the intervention, saying it would encourage men to know their sero-status.

Background

A study whose results were released by Makerere University School of Public Health on Monday, indicated the new antibody test would encourage male-partners to know their sero-status.

According to the study, seven in 10 men enrolled had accepted to know their HIV status using the anti-body self-test kits, which provides results in about 20 minutes.

Dr Joseph Matovu of Makerere University School of Public Health and also co-investigator in the study, indicated that the test kit works by collecting the mucosal exudates (oral fluids) by swabbing the gums.

"I think the issue of self-testing is okay and important but it depends on how government implements it," he noted.

Mr Mwebaze advised government to carry out mass awareness before rolling out the oral HIV/Aids self-test kits

for public use.

"People need to be prepared because HIV/Aids testing needs courage. If someone tests positive, they should know how to live positively," Mr Mwebaze reasoned and added that a follow-up confirmatory test at a health facility should be advised.

Mr Henry Nsubuga, the director of Makerere University Counselling and Guidance Centre, too welcomed the technological innovation.

"It's a good move because people will be able to know their HIV/Aids status in a more confidential manner," he said.

However, he urged government to ensure no fake self-test kits are imported into the country, which will give deceptive HIV results.

Dr Joshua Musinguzi, who heads the Aids Control Programme at the Ministry of Health, said they will form a technical task force to look at the results of the oral HIV/Aids self-testing study and make recommendations on appropriate implementation.

He dispelled fears among people that HIV/Aids can be transmitted through kissing, saying there is no substantial amount of virus in saliva to cause infection.

Dr Musinguzi said the oral self-test kit uses a fluid known as oral mucosal exudates, not saliva.