

Ground-breaking study to set new roadmap for HIV services

A ground-breaking study into HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), called *Kauntim mi tu*, has been launched today and praised by the Minister for Health, Hon. Sir Puka Temu and by the Government's key Health partners.

The findings of the study provide an improved roadmap for treatment, care and provision of other services to key populations affected by HIV in Port Moresby, the site of this recent report.

Initiated by the National Department of Health and the National AIDS Council Secretariat, it was undertaken with financial support from the Government of Australia, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In-kind contributions for the study were also received from Cepheid, FHI360, Oil Search Foundation, Population Services International and the World Health Organization.

Kauntim mi tu was undertaken by the PNG Institute of Medical Research, the Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study's lead investigators were Dr Angela Kelly-Hanku and Mr Avi Hakim.

The study involved women and girls who sell and exchange sex (FSWs), and men who have sex with men and transgender women (MSM and TG). It was conducted to provide strategic information for the government to scale up of essential HIV prevention and treatment services for these populations. Launched at the National Department of Health, some of the key findings include:

- ❑ HIV prevalence among FSWs in Port Moresby was 14.9% and most do not know their HIV status;
- ❑ Prevalence of STIs was high with 52.1% of FSWs having at least one undiagnosed STI (excluding HIV);
- ❑ Only 32.7% of FSWs used condoms with all clients who gave money in the last six months;
- ❑ More than half of FSWs (57.3%) have experienced physical violence and 34.2% have been forced to have sex. Approximately one in five experienced violence from their clients in the last six months;

- ❑ HIV prevalence among MSM and TGs in Port Moresby was 8.5% with few knowing that they have HIV;
- ❑ Prevalence of STIs was high among MSM and TGs with 34.0% having at least one undiagnosed STI (excluding HIV);
- ❑ Of MSM and TGs in Port Moresby, 59.1% did not use a condom at last sex with this kind of partner; and
- ❑ More than half of MSM and TGs (58.5%) have experienced physical violence and 24.1% have been forced to have sex. Of those experiencing physical violence in the last 12 months, 8.9% of survivors believed it was related to their sexual behaviours or sexual identity. Almost all MSM and TGs (90.4%) did not seek support after an experience of sexual violence.

Based on these findings, FSWs, MSM, and TGs in Port Moresby have made nine recommendations to the National Department of Health and other service providers:

1. Expand the use of peer driven and social networks and other new evidence-informed HIV testing strategies to increase HIV testing yield;
2. Strengthen linkages of people newly diagnosed with HIV to key population friendly clinics for immediate initiation of ART;
3. Expand the use of peer navigators to support treatment retention of key populations.
4. Promote gender and sexual orientation and identity equality;
5. Provide key population sensitivity training to healthcare workers at key health facilities and designate them as key population friendly;
6. Ensure the availability of safe-spaces for the reporting of physical and sexual violence, and the provision of services for key populations;
7. Integrate point of care STI testing and treatment in all sexual health services, including HIV testing and treatment facilities;
8. Increase provision of condoms and lubricants at key population hotspots and sexual health facilities; and
9. Ensure women and girls who sell and exchange sex are tested for HIV and syphilis during pregnancy, receive treatment as needed, and are provided with comprehensive reproductive health care including family planning.

The study, the first of its kind in the country and a global first – providing up to eight point-of-care tests at the study site - drew

praise from the Government and other partners who were involved. Importantly, members of the peer led civil societies representing FSW (Friends Frangipani) and MSM/TG (Kapul Champions) also commended the study team in light of the comfort and confidentiality emphasised in the study. The following are some quotes from key partners involved in the study:

Hon Sir Puka Temu, Minister for Health and HIV/AIDS: "This study will contribute to the country's understanding of the national HIV and STI epidemics for years to come. It will provide better focussed information for policy makers, implementers, service providers, and donors. The Government wishes to thank the Australian and US Governments and the Global Fund for funding this important study. We can also be very proud of the role played by the PNG Institute of Medical Research in leading the study."

Dr Kelly-Hanku, Kauntim mi tu Principal Investigator: "Kauntim mi tu provides not only the first size estimation of women who sell and/or exchange sex and men who have sex with men in Port Moresby, but also the most representative bio-behavioural data about these key populations to date. Globally, it was the first study of its kind, providing same day STI testing and treatment. It was also an excellent example of partnership between the government, the research community, civil society and donors."

Mr Tony Lupiwa, Oversight Manager, National AIDS Council Secretariat: "FSW, MSM and TG are a part of our community and must have their human rights protected, as outlined in our constitution where we are all equal. This study highlights their plight and need for acceptance. It also highlights the needs for enhanced HIV/STI, health, and social services for FSWs, MSM and TGs."

Mr David Bridger, UNAIDS Country Director: "While the AIDS response in Papua New Guinea has made substantive gains, the epidemic is far from over. Kauntim mi tu provides critical data for government and stakeholders alike to ensure that HIV programming reaches the right people in the right place at the right time. This will be essential if Papua New Guinea is to realise its commitment to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030."



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