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# Caregivers Come Together

HIV-positive Health  
Workers Form New  
Network in Kenya

Healthcare workers are at the heart of Kenya's HIV response; yet, they themselves are vulnerable to HIV infection. Paradoxically, healthcare workers often have restricted access to treatment, care, and support services. While

their profession places them in close proximity to those services, it also exposes them to heightened stigma when they test HIV positive, making them more reluctant to seek HIV services. To date, there have been few HIV prevention, treatment, or support services targeted specifically toward healthcare workers. They have been a forgotten group.

The network's coordinator, Phyllis Kisabei, describes the situation faced by many healthcare workers:

"The health workers were facing a lot of stigma and discrimination. They are the ones giving services to people in the community, but their issues, especially on HIV and AIDS, are not addressed... They feel they're alone. So they don't access the services which they are giving, like VCT services... and the few who know their status are not coming to the services... They are hiding."

To help the network get off the ground, the Health Policy Initiative helped it link with other networks to receive training in treatment literacy and advocacy. With the project's technical and financial support, five network members attended and made presentations at the National Nurses Association Golden Jubilee Meeting in July 2008. They shared their personal experiences living positively and called for reducing stigma and discrimination in the health sector. Phyllis made a presentation on "HIV/AIDS and Nurses: Demystifying Stigma" to an audience that included the Minister of Public Health and Sanitation and the Director of the National AIDS Control Council.

## The Way Forward

From the original 49 members who helped launch the network, the National HIV/AIDS Health Workers Network has already grown to 300 people—although many of the new members are not yet ready to disclose their HIV status publicly.

The network has also participated in several radio programs, including features on Radio Waumini (a religious station) in May 2008, KAS FM in December 2008, and Radio

In 2008, Task Order 1 of the USAID | Health Policy Initiative provided financial and technical assistance to the Kenya Treatment Access Movement (KETAM) to mobilize healthcare workers from across the country to facilitate formation of a national network for HIV-positive healthcare workers. With project support, the network held planning meetings in Nairobi, Thika, and Machakos; and the National HIV/AIDS Health Workers Network was officially launched on April 29, 2008. More than 49 health workers from five provinces attended the launch. The network's mission is to act as an advocate for all healthcare workers living with or affected by HIV, helping to reduce stigma and discrimination, increase their visibility, and expand access to treatment, care, and support services.

Kenya

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# One Woman's Struggle

Her personal experiences gave Phyllis Kisabei the strength to support her fellow health workers

Phyllis Kisabei, the National Coordinator of the National HIV/AIDS Health Workers Network, is married, with four children. She discovered her status in 2000. Although her husband knew he was HIV positive, he did not disclose his status. Phyllis sought VCT after one of her children was diagnosed with TB.

"I knew the correlation between HIV and tuberculosis," she says. "So I went to VCT in 2000."

"The health workers were facing a lot of stigma and discrimination. They are the ones giving the services to people in the community, but their issues on HIV and AIDS were not addressed."

—Phyllis Kisabei  
Coordinator,  
National HIV/AIDS  
Health Workers Network

Before this, Phyllis asked her husband many times to give her permission to go for testing, but he opposed her: "I told my husband many times, 'I want to go for VCT,' and he refused," she recalls.

When she finally went to be tested—despite her husband's objections—Phyllis recalls, "I was very sure, like so many other Kenyans who think they are HIV

negative. I did not think I was at risk... So when the results came out positive, I was shocked. I cried."

She received psychological support from another network, Women Fighting AIDS in Kenya (WOFAK), and began participating in support group meetings. But many of the women participating in the group were not employed and Phyllis did not feel that she fit in. "I said, 'back in my hospital, I'm sure I'm not alone.'" She returned to Kenyatta National Referral Hospital, where she works as a Senior Nursing Officer. She disclosed

her status to members of the senior staff and asked them to begin referring HIV-positive patients and staff to her. In 2006, she formed a psychosocial support group for HIV-positive staff members.

In the course of her work, Phyllis saw that doctors and nurses were extremely reluctant to access testing and treatment services. "They are hiding," she says, explaining that health workers in both the public and private sectors suffer from high levels of internal stigma and fear.

Phyllis became a confidante to staff and patients at the hospital. Their trust in her enabled many to seek testing and treatment for the first time. She continued to expand the support group. Under her guidance, it has grown to 40 members. Phyllis has also helped 25 health workers from nearby hospitals and health facilities form support groups and has successfully advocated for the addition of youth-friendly services to the hospital's comprehensive care center.

Since discovering her HIV status, Phyllis has held firm to the belief that she is not alone. This has given her the strength to reach out to those who are struggling in silence.

So it seems natural that Phyllis became one of the founders of the new National HIV/AIDS Health Workers Network.

Through the network, she has been able to reach out to health workers far beyond the walls of her hospital. She was invited to speak on "HIV/AIDS and Nurses: Demystifying Stigma," at the National Nurses Association annual conference in July 2008. Her audience included hundreds of her fellow nurses, as well as national luminaries such as the Minister of Public Health and Sanitation.

The training she has received from the Health Policy Initiative on treatment literacy, advocacy, palliative

Phyllis Kisabei, Coordinator of the new National HIV/AIDS Health Workers Network, smiles as she recounts her experiences founding the network.

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA MBUYA-BROWN



“There are times I could be alone in the support group and now we are forty. It makes me feel good.

I like the friends I have—the ones I’ve met since being infected...I have more friends than I thought.”

—Phyllis Kisabei

care, and monitoring and evaluation have helped her to solidify the network and to continue to strengthen the support group at her own hospital.

The network has already grown to more than 300 members from almost all the regions of Kenya. It has even begun making efforts to expand into Northeastern Province. Combating HIV in this region is notoriously difficult due to low levels of community awareness and high levels of stigma and discrimination.

In the future, Phyllis hopes to keep the network growing and to become more involved in advocacy. “My future plans for the network are big,” she says, smiling widely.

Kameme in December 2009. The programs focused on the network's launch; its mission, vision, and activities; as well as the need to reduce stigma and discrimination in the health sector. A network representative also participated in the Joint AIDS Program Review, where she raised issues of stigma and discrimination in the health sector, stockouts of essential HIV medicines—particularly those for treating opportunistic infections—threats posed by multiple-drug-resistant TB, the scarcity of health workers, and the need for child-friendly HIV services. The group's

most important accomplishment, however, may be its existence. For the first time, HIV-positive health workers have a place to turn to for support. The network has brought them hope and promises to bring them more in the future—hope that they, in turn, will pass on to their patients.

*For more information on HIV-related stigma and discrimination in Kenya's health sector, see [Measuring the Degree of S&D in Kenya: An Index for HIV/AIDS Facilities and Providers](http://www.healthpolicyinitiative.com). Available at [www.healthpolicyinitiative.com](http://www.healthpolicyinitiative.com).*



Patients wait for care in a crowded community hospital.

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