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NEWS | December 6, 2008

Free HIV counselling brings hope to children

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Kampala

They trekked from various villages and gathered at Nambogo Primary School, in Namugongo to undergo HIV tests. As early as 8am, most parents and their children had arrived at the venue, probably because they were hungry for the service. The long queues could tell how the population here was desperately in need of the service and how people are increasingly embracing voluntary counselling and testing.

The zeal shown by both the children and adults to freely know their HIV status raised hope that the stigma associated with HIV/Aids is slowly fading out as more people come to appreciate the importance of knowing their HIV status.

For Mr Peter Sserumaga , a taxi driver from Kijabijo in Namugongo, transport was not a problem. He used a taxi to transport his two wives and six children to the centre where HIV counselling and testing were taking place. "I have brought my two wives here and our children to be tested and I also hope to do the same as soon as they are done. I want my family to live an informed life ,"Mr Peter Sserumaga said.

Ms Maria Nanfuuka also a resident of the same village said; "No matter the outcome of the results of my four children, I have done the right thing because I will be able to seek help." By midday, over 270 children and adults had been tested and many more were still in the queue waiting for their turn.

The HIV testing was done during the launch of the Many-Yambwa (know your HIV status and be helped) testing exercise by the Namugongo Fund for Special Children (NFSC) in collaboration with the Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC). Over 1,500 pupils on the NFSC Feeding and After School Programme together with their caretaker families benefited from the screening programme for HIV which was conducted for four weeks.

According to NFSC's Founder, Ms Rosette Serwanga, the exercise is aimed at helping the parents [guardian] and the children know their HIV status and receive help and guidance through the NFSC/JCRC joint TREAT programme.

TREAT(The Regional Expansion for Anti-Retroviral Therapy) is a United States Agency for International Development (Usaid) funded programme which started in December, 2003. NFSC is its 36th TREAT site in Uganda, catering for over 35,000 clients. The two partner organisations have so far carried out testing exercises at Bulindo, Kyaliwajjala and kijabijjo villages all in the outskirts of Kampala.

Ms Serwanga says screening exercises would regularly be carried out so as to give a hand to the government and other partners to ensure that Uganda gets rid of HIV/Aids.

NFSC's Pediatric outreach programme coordinator, Dr Eleanor Namusoke, however, says more attention should be given to children. "Children for long have been the "odd man out," rarely considered as a possible target for HIV prevention, yet they are equally exposed to HIV risks in as many ways as the adults. It is the adults who normally walk into clinics or other testing centres to know their status but the children are left home," Dr Namusoke said.

Currently, an estimated 110,000 children are living with HIV/Aids. Majority contract the virus from their mothers during pregnancy, child birth, and through breast milk. This is what the doctors term as mother-to-child transmission of HIV/Aids.

The Ministry of Health estimated that every year, 25,000 are born with Aids in Uganda. Children born with Aids are victims of the parents' reluctance to go for tests whereby the newborn could have been saved. Currently, only 30 per cent of Ugandans know their HIV status.

The State Minister for Health, Dr Emmanuel Otaala says parents should ensure that children are tested for HIV Aids early enough to save their lives.

Dr Otaala says those who call themselves human rights activists should stop blocking people who wish to test children, claiming that they are minors who cannot consent. "Aids is a matter of life and death and we should take serious the testing of children to enable them live a positive but healthy life," he says.

Dr Otaala says 50 per cent of children born with HIV will die within two years if they are given treatment early enough. He also says Prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV programme should be utilised to minimise the number of children born with the virus.

Mothers enrolled on this programme are advised to take ARVs and also take Neverapin tablets during labour to reduce the chances of passing on the virus to their babies during pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding. Neverapin syrup is also given to the child immediately after birth.

HIV/Aids experts say Neverapine reduces chances of mother to child transmission of Aids by 50 per cent. Without this treatment, around 15 to 30 per cent of babies born to HIV positive women will become infected with HIV virus during pregnancy or delivery. Another 5 to 20 per cent will become infected through breast feeding.

This is why mothers are advised to attend antenatal care and also deliver from health facilities where health workers can advise them on what they are expected to do to keep themselves healthy and protect children from the virus.