



PrEP Advocacy in South Africa: How far?

Introduction

South Africa (SA), has a population of 53 million. Of this population, an estimated 6.8 million people are living with HIV. Within the general epidemic, specific population groups such as sex workers, men who have sex with men, (MSM), HIV serodiscordant couples, truckers and people who inject drugs have higher rates of HIV infection and require specialized interventions. Adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 24 are disproportionately affected by the epidemic. In the absence of an HIV vaccine one strategy to help reduce new infections is implementing oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

The PrEP Advocacy Project

From March 1 2015 to February 29 2016, a PrEP advocacy project was conducted in Cape Town, SA, where an AVAC fellow was hosted by TB/HIV Care.

Project Objectives

- Work with decision makers in the National Department of Health to accelerate the process of developing extended PrEP guidelines
- Civil society advocacy and demand for policies for PrEP implementation
- Effectively engage and support civil society and clinical trialists in preparing for the results of the dapivirine ring studies

Methods

In-depth interviews with key informants were conducted to gain an understanding of; the key players in PrEP advocacy in SA, dialogue around PrEP, stakeholder involvement in the development of PrEP guidelines for MSM, status of plans to develop extended PrEP guidelines, the status of the application to have Truvada approved for PrEP and what needed to be done to speed up the process, issues regarding PrEP that communities needed to know about, what needed to be done to prepare for PrEP rollout and how best advocates and civil society could help push the PrEP agenda forward. The information gathered, informed the development of a comprehensive work plan, advocacy strategies and the building of a strong coalition.

Multiple advocacy platforms were used to achieve the goals of the project. These included meetings, conferences and community dialogues to get people talking about PrEP and build support for the campaign. Blogs, opinion editorials, press statements and radio interviews were also used to influence decision makers, share thoughts and opinions on how PrEP could be rolled out and how advocates could support the rollout process.

Tips for successful advocacy work

- Select the advocacy issue carefully,
- Gain a clear understanding of the social, political and policy contexts of the project.
- Build evidence to support the advocacy issue
- Identify and engage stakeholders and advocacy champions
- Use multiple advocacy strategies and platforms
- Put an effective coordination structure in place.
- Take advantage of special advocacy moments
- Press on and keep focused on the advocacy goals
- Take supervision by both AVAC mentors and host supervisors seriously.



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Challenges

- Securing commitment and support from some stakeholders
- Lack of coordination of the advocacy efforts
- Unresponsive and unsupportive authorities and stakeholders

Above: Mobilizing women to demand PrEP in Masiphumelele, Cape Town

Results

- The Medicines Control Council approved use of Truvada for PrEP on 27 November 2015.
- National Oral PrEP and Test and Treat guidelines have undergone several reviews and are near finalization.
- A National Policy on HIV PrEP and Test and Treat is also near finalization.
- Plans to rollout PrEP to sex workers as well as providing immediate HIV treatment to those who test positive are set to commence in June, 2016. This rollout process is being staged.
- Meetings and conference calls to prepare for the microbicide vaginal ring results were successfully conducted. Unfortunately the dissemination of research findings has been slow in some provinces and as advocates, we are pushing for the immediate dissemination of these results.

Conclusion

The project's main goals were met. However, advocacy should continue to ensure that PrEP is made available soon to all those who need it. There is also a need to strongly support the International Partnership for Microbicides and the Microbicides Trials Network to conduct open-label studies of the vaginal microbicides ring and in addition, some socio-behavioral studies to find out why women below 21 years old did not benefit from the vaginal ring.

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