

Prepping for PrEP: a readiness assessment among health facilities in Blantyre, Malawi

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Background

Malawi continues to experience a high number of new HIV infections, particularly among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), female sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM). PrEP was first endorsed by the Malawi Government in 2019 and but was only offered specialized drop-in centers serving key populations. Integrating PrEP into health facilities requires integration of screening in service entry points where those who are eligible receive services. To prepare for PrEP scale-up in Blantyre, which has Malawi's highest HIV seroprevalence rate, a readiness assessment was conducted, led by the District Health Office (DHO) in partnership with MaiKhanda Trust, among 17 health centers and hospitals in December 2020, during which time only 3 people were documented to have been prescribed PrEP.

Methods

The objectives of the Facility PrEP Readiness Assessment were to assess current system capacity, specifically, human resources, workflow, and infrastructure for the offering of PrEP. Findings from the assessment were intended to identify areas for planning at district level and areas of focus for initial quality improvement at facilities.

The assessment was conducted by a team from DHO and MaiKhanda Trust through interviews of three key individuals at each facility. Assessments were conducted in 17 health facilities and 4 drop-in centers (see figure 1) between August 14, 2020 – January 15, 2021. Questions focused on training of staff cadres, ability to stock and dispense medications, documentation systems, conduct of routine sexual history taking and availability of mental health services, among others.

Results

Of 17 general health facilities, only 12 had staff who had been trained on the PrEP guidelines and were prepared to package and dispense PrEP medications. Two facilities reported staff were not prepared to routinely conduct sexual histories. Mental health services were available in 7 sites, and youth-friendly services in 13. PrEP registers had not yet been distributed but were to be located in only one room in the clinic. Rapid HIV testing was available at all sites.

Availability of HIV Prevention and HIV Services

Service	Number of facilities providing service out of 17 facilities assessed	Proportion	Remarks
HIV testing	15	100%	
ART	15	100%	
PrEP	5	33.3%	Mainly provided in Pakachere drop-in centers
STI management	15	100%	
Condoms	15	100%	
PEP	12	80%	Not provided in drop-in centers (research protocol)
Mental health and substance use	5	33.3%	Not provided in drop-in centers

PrEP Provision Readiness

- Few (33%) facilities were providing PrEP as an HIV prevention service
- All facilities provided HIV and STI testing
- Few (33%) facilities were providing mental health or substance use services
- Few (13%) facilities had PrEP guidelines
- Most (80%) facilities had at least one provider trained on PrEP guidelines
- 87% have space to deliver private and confidential services

Figure 1: Map of 21 facilities selected to participate in PrEP QIC, following the Facility PrEP readiness assessment. Blue = hospitals; yellow = health center; green = drop-in centers.

Conclusions

Preparing facilities to integrate PrEP in multiple service entry points is critical for scale-up and requires planning for service integration. Training of staff to assess eligibility, offer, package and dispense PrEP is necessary, including all staff who have contact with potential candidates in multiple service areas. Effective scale-up of PrEP within health centers and hospitals will require staff training on sexual history-taking to ensure routine discussions about sexual history and PrEP for all sexually active patients who access outpatient, adolescent, reproductive or STI services. Available co-located mental health services to address depression and anxiety, and youth-friendly services to attract at-risk AGYW and young MSM will prepare facilities to address common co-morbidities and reach youth. Registers need to be available at multiple service entry points and include fields for assessment to determine PrEP eligibility.

