Counsellors need to be well trained

Many HIV/Aids activists fall into the position but aren't properly equipped

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GETTING diagnosed as HIV-positive can have the same emotional impact as losing a parent.

While HIV health-care specialists say counselling is a crucial and often-overlooked treatment for HIV-positive patients, they disagree about the degree of training necessary for that support, given South Africa's limited financial resources.

Many public-health clinics use lay counsellors, lightly trained workers who are cheaper and easier to find than psychologists, to perform HIV tests and counselling.

"A six-week training course does not make someone able to perform a psychological act," said Nicole Barnes, a registered counsellor who works with HIV patients at Wits University's campus health clinic. "By those standards let nurses perform operations if there's a need."

Dr Moyahabo Mabitsi, programme manager for Anova health in Joburg, said Anova created a programme to better train lay counsellors. She recognised that lay counsellors were not a cure-all. "If you have a patient who is really struggling to cope, they're limited in the support that they can offer the patient," she said.

Anova clinics use a combination of psychiatric nurses and referrals for patients who need more.

"You can't underestimate the effect of a positive HIV result," Mabitsi said.

She recalled one patient who learnt that her husband had been unfaithful because she now had HIV. That patient had to be hospitalised for the mental trauma.

Pre-test counselling consists of educating patients about how the test works and obtaining informed consent. Several care providers emphasised that mental health screenings should also be included.

Post-test counselling for negative results involves educating patients about risk and the window period during which HIV can remain undetected.

However, for positive results, counselling needs vary depending on how prepared patients are to hear the news.

Nataly Woollett, the psychosocial technical head for the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute, said reactions ranged from shock to passive acceptance. "For unsuspecting young adolescents, often the first thing they think about is suicide," she said.

Barnes explained that while more extreme cases that leapt straight to depression and suicidal thoughts were easier to spot, to the untrained eye, the denial stage of grief appeared stoic.

"It doesn't mean they're going to jump off a bridge tomorrow, but without professional support, we're losing these cases," Barnes said.

BE SURE: A health worker takes a blood sample for an Aids test. Patients having Aids tests need counselling. PICTURE: ESTEBAN FELIX / AP

If patients don't reach the acceptance phase of grieving, they are not likely to take their medications properly. Barnes said that was like a slower version of suicide.

Barnes called for funding so that lay counsellors could be thoroughly trained, certified and registered with the Allied Health Professions Council of South Africa.

Mabitsi, however, advocated that lay counsellors must be trained to determine beforehand the most likely reaction from the patient to anticipate the care needed. If the need is too high, they should refer patients to professionals with higher training.

Woollett said the word "counsellor" was "a bit of a misnomer" for the lay counsellor position because counselling usually required significant training and supervision, but they played an important role in South Africa.

"At the community level, it's a group of people who are strong advocates, and we need those kinds of people in the health sector," Woollett said.

Lay counsellors should receive more training so that they can counsel at a higher level with supervision.

Being married doesn't mean you're protected against HIV

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DORCAS* was an 18-year-old virgin when she met her husband. Both of them were studying at the time and three years later he paid lobola for her.

They later had two children and she could not be happier. However, the fact that her husband is the only person she has ever slept with did not protect Dorcas from contacting HIV within marriage.

Dorcas's story is every married person's worst nightmare and shatters the myth that only those who are promiscuous are susceptible to contracting HIV.

The now-54-year-old woman's world came crashing down in 1999 when she was 38.

She was working as a domestic worker at the time and her employers used to take her with wherever they holidayed.

That particular year they were in Lebanon and after a few days Dorcas fell ill.

"I was shaking and my body was sore," she recalled.

She was hospitalised and various tests were done and it was found that she was HIV-positive.

Dorcas did not believe that she was HIV-positive and neither did her employers.

When they arrived in South Africa they took her to four different doctors for further tests.

The results were all the same: Dorcas was HIV-positive.

After that Dorcas told her family about her status.

"My brother stood up, hugged me and told me that he still loved me, HIV or not."

She tried to get her husband to test for HIV but Dorcas says he refused, saying the fact that she was HIV-positive did not mean he was also infected.

"He also did not want to use condoms even though he knew my status.

"I refused to sleep with him because I did not know whether he was positive or not and I did not want to be re-infected."

For two years Dorcas lived with her husband but they were never intimate because he still refused to test or even use condoms. He later left Dorcas and moved in with another woman.

Since the day she found out about her status 16 years ago, Dorcas has not had sex.

"It is difficult to tell someone that you are HIV-positive because some people do not want to condomise," she says.

Her infection has changed the way she views HIV/Aids and how it is contracted because like many people, she thought being married and sleeping with only one partner could shield her from it.

"I cried for a week after finding out I was HIV-positive; my husband is the only person I ever slept with. I was a virgin in Grade 11 when I met him."

Dorcas says the only way for people in marriages to protect themselves is to use condoms when they are done with making babies.

"Men leave their wives and have extramarital affairs and women also leave their husband for other men.

"The problem is that married people do not use condoms in their marriages and even when they cheat they prefer flesh to flesh," she says.

* *Not her real name.*