

UNAIDS Policy on HIV testing and counselling

Voluntary HIV testing accompanied by counselling has a vital role to play within a comprehensive range of measures for HIV/AIDS prevention and support, and should be encouraged. The potential benefits of testing and counselling for the individual include improved health status through good nutritional advice and earlier access to care and treatment/prevention for HIV-related illness; emotional support; better ability to cope with HIV-related anxiety; awareness of safer options for reproduction and infant feeding; and motivation to initiate or maintain safer sexual and drug-related behaviours. Other benefits include safer blood donation.

UNAIDS therefore encourages countries to establish national policies along the following lines.

1.

Make good-quality, voluntary and confidential HIV testing and counselling available and accessible. Reliable HIV testing should be made available on a voluntary and confidential basis. Voluntary testing should be provided in a non-stigmatizing environment, and the services should include pre-test counselling (where possible and if desired), informed consent, and post-test counselling.

In designing these services, countries should give special consideration to increasing women's voluntary access to them. Women should be offered information on reproductive and infant feeding options and on the use of antiretroviral treatment to reduce the risk of mother-to-child (vertical) HIV transmission. Regardless of the presence of risk factors or the potential for effective intervention to prevent transmission, women should not be coerced into testing, or tested without consent. Instead, they should be given all relevant information and allowed to make their own decisions about HIV testing, reproduction and infant feeding.

HIV testing and counselling for couples is effective, and their voluntary participation should be encouraged. Special consideration should also be given to offering voluntary HIV testing and counselling to people thought to engage in high-risk sexual or drug-related behaviour.

2.

Ensure informed consent and confidentiality in clinical care, research, the donation of blood, blood products or organs, and other situations where an individual's identity will be linked to his or her HIV test results. In situations of linked HIV testing, the individual should be informed of the potential benefits and risks of an HIV test; the principles of voluntary testing including informed consent and confidentiality should be respected; and post-test counselling should be provided.

3.

Strengthen quality assurance and safeguards on potential abuse before licensing commercial HIV home collection and home self-tests. HIV home collection tests (in which specimens are collected at home and sent off for analysis) and home self-tests offer the advantages of enhanced access and anonymity. However, these tests may have serious negative consequences, especially if they are not connected with confirmatory testing, and with counselling and care services, or if they are applied coercively to spouses, sex partners, and people seeking employment, entitlements or services. Licenses for commercial "home" tests should be continuously reviewed and test uses monitored.

4.

Encourage community involvement in sentinel surveillance and epidemiological surveys. HIV testing conducted for these purposes is usually anonymous and unlinked, and may not require individual consent. However, the findings of such surveys are of great community concern, and so communities need to have a sense of "ownership" of the process. Community consent should be secured before surveys are conducted, and the community should be involved in the survey and have access to the results.

5.

Discourage mandatory testing. HIV testing without informed consent and confidentiality is a violation of human rights. Moreover, there is no evidence that mandatory testing achieves public health goals. UNAIDS therefore discourages this practice. HIV testing in which the individual's identity is linked to the test result must not be done without the individual's informed consent. In addition, he or she should receive post-test counselling, and have the assurance that all results - including the fact that a test was performed - will be kept confidential.

This statement summarizes UNAIDS' position on HIV testing and on counselling issues related to HIV testing. It is addressed to

national authorities and is meant to facilitate the development or strengthening of national policies on the subject.