

THE IMPACT OF RAPID HIV TESTING FOR COUPLES

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Introduction

LASS launched their Rapid HIV Testing service in June 2009 and then engaged the communities in HIV testing as described in *The Influence and Effects of Community HIV Testing Programme for the African Communities in Leicester*.ⁱ This engagement led to community confidence to ask for different approaches to HIV testing – the couples HIV testing has developed from this confidence and has grown through word of mouth. “True” couple HIV testing (where both are present for the actual test and results) is not provided by other HIV testing services in Leicester (or regionally), although as this initial work shows couples testing is popular within African communities in Leicester. Research and studies, mainly from different African countries, have shown the benefits of the couples testing approach.ⁱⁱ Many of the studies conclude that more should be made of the couple testing (and counselling) approach.ⁱⁱⁱ

Objectives

The couples testing started slowly in May 2012 and has grown since then.

Rapid HIV testing for couples at LASS has the objectives of:

- Meeting the need for couples testing shown by the communities
- Enabling disclosure of HIV positive status within a relationship and discussion of the way ahead.
- Supporting partners in disclosure of HIV status and relationship related issues
- Creating confidence and trust between partners by openness in HIV status disclosure

Methods

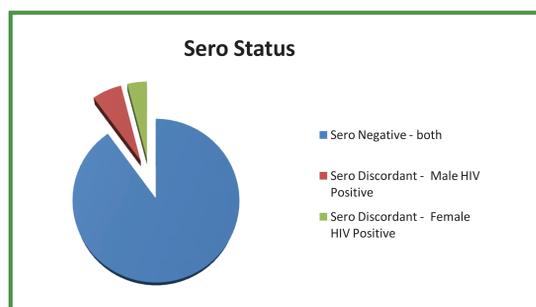
For this initial study the standard information recorded for all people who taken an HIV test at LASS has been used as the basis of the analysis. During couples testing partners were asked their reasons for testing as a couple. These were recorded and have been examined as part of the study.

In some cases both partners in a couple tested but not together at one time – this data has not been included in the study.

A brief literature review has been undertaken to determine the maturity of this approach in different countries.

Results

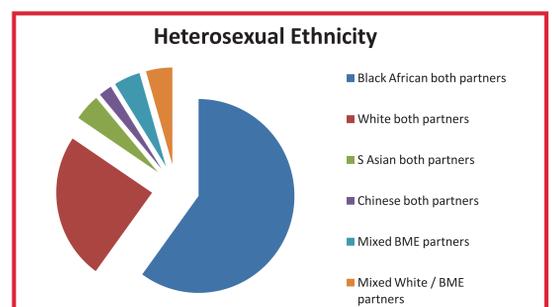
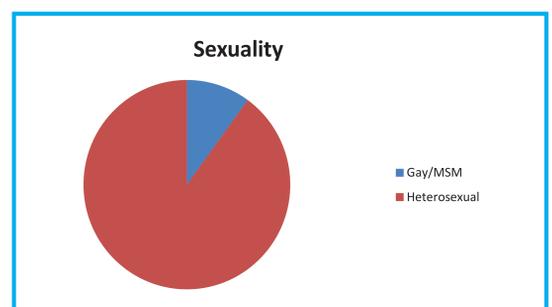
Over the period from May 2012 to August 2014, 50 couples / intimate partners have been tested, with 10 in the first year and steadily increasing. The majority of the couples testing is for heterosexual couples (90%).



The proportion of Reactive (positive) tests within the couples testing is higher than reactivities in individual's tests. This is because one partner can use the couples test to disclose their (generally) already known status to their (new) partner.

The proportion of Black African couples testing is higher than other communities (60%). This is higher than the average for Black African people testing individually at LASS.

Approximately 62% of couples tested had 1 or both partners in the age range 19-30. Typically 40 – 45% of individuals who test are in that age range.



Reasons why people are testing as couples:

People have given a range of reasons for testing together. In some cases it is a way to disclose their status (~10%). For 50% of people testing this was their first ever HIV Test – with their partner – these individuals said they thought it a strong start to their relationship and sexual commitment.

We are in a new relationship and want to test together before we have sex (36%)

We plan to get married 38%

We have been together for a while but want to get tested together before sex and to share our results (38%)

In all cases the discussions with each and both partners pre and post test enabled the partners to talk about their relationship in the context of one or both being diagnosed positive. In more than 50% of cases this was the first time they had this discussion although they had decided to test together.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The numbers in this study are relatively small, but they represent about 12% of the number of people LASS tested for HIV since starting couples testing in May 2012. The study shows that couples testing is highly acceptable to Black African and young people in the 19-30 age range. The study shows that couples testing offers the opportunity for sero status disclosure between partners in a supported and structured approach.

In line with other couples HIV testing studies it is recommended more work is done. It is proposed that a regional research programme is established to more formally evaluate the short & long term benefits of couples HIV testing. This should include consideration of home sampling and testing to promote and integrate the use of home sampling and home testing into the couples testing practice, including developing guidance for use, pathways and support for the couple / partners.

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ⁱ The Influence and Effects of Community HIV Testing Programme for the African Communities in Leicester: A Research Report.: AHPN & LASS: Feb 2012

ⁱⁱ Systematic Review of Couple-Based HIV Intervention and Prevention Studies: Advantages, Gaps and Future Directions. Tina Jiwatram-Negron, Nabil El-Bassa. AIDS Behaviour 1 July 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Comparing Couples' and Individual Voluntary Counseling and Testing for HIV at Antenatal Clinics in Tanzania. A Randomized Trial. Becker, Mlay, Schwandt & Lyamuya. AIDS Behaviour 2010