

Recommendations for expanding HIV testing in the Pacific

Regional Level Technical Consultation on HIV Testing for the Pacific
5–6 May 2008, Pago Pago, American Samoa



It is internationally recognised that HIV testing is a crucial entry point for prevention, treatment, care and support services for those vulnerable to, or living with, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).



Hosted by the Government of American Samoa, a technical meeting was convened on 5 and 6 May 2008 by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) in Pago Pago with key regional partners, including the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA (CDC), Oceania Society for Sexual Health and HIV Medicine (OSSHHM), Australian National Serology Reference Laboratory (NRL), Pacific Paramedical Training Centre (PPTC), Hawaii AIDS Education and Training Center (HAETC), Pacific Island Health Officers Association (PIHOA) and Life Foundation.



The consultation was part of efforts to scale up HIV testing and counselling. Its primary purpose was to examine and agree on a more harmonised regional approach for HIV testing. It is envisaged that streamlined technical support by participating regional agencies will enable more rapid and coordinated scaling-up of testing and counselling in the Pacific.



In discussing the issues, we recognise:



- the considerable efforts and progress made to date by individual governments and technical partners at regional and country level;
- the ongoing work still required to create an efficient and coordinated response to the challenge of HIV testing in the Pacific;
- the real concerns raised by country partners over recent times regarding the importance of cogent recommendations that are realistic and sufficiently flexible and that meet Pacific needs;
- the uniqueness of the Pacific environment in terms of the often small populations that are remotely located, and its considerable diversity in terms of culture as well as political and socio-economic development;
- the issue of managing constant new advances in testing technologies in an environment of capacity limitations at country level;
- the enormous diversity of need and capacity of Pacific Island countries and territories in terms of laboratory and clinical requirements, and the importance of coordination and innovation in providing effective responses;
- the validation of the existing algorithms used in the Pacific that have provided guidance and reference for current testing practices; and
- that quality assurance and validation for HIV testing remain a challenge – conventional quality assurance and validation processes are often not feasible in the Pacific and as such require modified or innovative policy and systems.



The joint partners recommend in the first instance the strengthening of existing laboratory testing services in terms of compliance to minimum standards, and further extension of services with point-of-care testing.

In order to support increased access to accurate testing, the following steps are recommended:

1. Evaluation and validation of additional rapid tests and confirmatory strategies, using samples from the region.
2. Consider replacing the two ELISA confirmation tests strategy currently performed at a regional referral laboratory with two rapid tests performed at an in-country laboratory, based on the results of the evaluation mentioned above.
3. Careful and staged introduction of point-of-care testing to include:
 - criteria for selection of pilot sites after communication with countries on their acceptance of the proposal;
 - development of data collection infrastructure at all pilot sites, and its use to monitor and troubleshoot;
 - development of a standardised training protocol and implementation of on-site training, including competency assessment for:
 - test performance at point-of-care and laboratory sites
 - data management
 - referral
 - reporting of results
 - confidentiality
 - quality assurance; and
 - development of models for site-specific pre-test information and post-test counselling.
4. To ensure the smooth implementation and careful management of the above steps, it is recommended that SPC convenes an HIV testing task force to accomplish the objectives and ensure linkages with broader regional guidance being developed by WHO-WPRO and CDC. The task force will comprise key representatives of the joint consultation participants and country representatives.