

HIV/AIDS Communications Project in Pakistan

Summary of Activities and Goals

Update Date: 9/13/2019

Following the tragic outbreak of HIV cases in Larkana, Sindh in April 2019, our volunteer team, comprised of several Pakistani-Americans in the medical field and colleagues from Brown University, formed with the goal of empowering healthcare providers with HIV disease knowledge to reduce stigma and increase awareness around HIV/AIDS in Pakistan. We have been operating with the following objectives:

Objectives:

- Reduce stigma by increasing awareness about HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases in Pakistan.
- Train new generations of healthcare providers and academia about HIV disease knowledge and management in Pakistan (via HIV trainings (online) courses, conferences and/or in-person trainings)
- Work with different levels of academic institutions and government to create sustainable solutions to control future transmission.
- Help to enhance the existing HIV care infrastructure in affected areas of Pakistan

Since forming, we have delivered a series of educational webinars and discussions that disseminated HIV disease knowledge in Sindh; held meetings with several members of the National AIDS Control Program in Pakistan; engaged local universities with the goal of encouraging trainings and research on HIV in Pakistan; and visited Larkana to better understand the current scope of activities in response to the recent HIV outbreak in Sindh.

Below are summaries of our completed activities:

- **Webinar Series:** From May 19 to June 23, 2019, the HIV/AIDS Communications Team delivered a series of webinars to healthcare providers in Sindh, Pakistan, including MDs, Nurses, and other allied healthcare workers. The aim of this webinar series was to disseminate HIV disease knowledge at different forums including teaching institutions, hospitals, and other provider groups. It was initially delivered in Sindh in direct response to the HIV outbreak which began in April 2019, and the webinars were heavily attended by health care providers and members of the medical community from the Larkana district of Sindh. The six webinars, which were led by Project Director Fizza Gillani and featured lectures from faculty members from Brown University Medical School, focused on standards of care and prevention and were organized as follows:
 1. *HIV Disease: Myth and Facts*, May 19, 2019
 2. *HIV Testing, Stigma, and Patient-Provider Communications*, May 26, 2019; Guest Speaker: Philip Chan, MD* and Rizwan Naeem, MD
 3. *The HIV Care Cascade: An Example from Rhode Island, USA*, June 2, 2019; Guest Speaker: Joseph M. Garland, MD*

4. *Preventing Mother-to-Child HIV Transmission and Caring for Infected Infants and Children*, June 9, 2019; Guest Speakers: Susan Cu-Uvin, MD*; Jerome Larkin, MD*; and Sabina Holland, MD*
 5. *Caring for Coinfected Patients (HIV-Tuberculosis, HIV-Hepatitis C, HIV-Hepatitis B)*, June 16, 2019; Guest Speakers: Natasha Rybak, MD*; Martha Sanchez, MD*
 6. *Fostering Hope: The Role of Mental Health Care in HIV Treatment from Start to Finish*, June 23, 2019; Guest Speaker: Jamie Kenney, PhD (Arizona)
- **Meetings with the National AIDS Control Program (NACP), July 2019:** From July 15 to August 2, 2019, the HIV/AIDS Communications Project Team held meetings with members of the NACP in Islamabad, Pakistan. The objectives of these meetings were to understand the HIV activities that the NACP is conducting throughout Pakistan, discuss the potential for collaboration between the Providence/Boston CFAR (at Lifespan and Brown University), and brainstorm funding opportunities. These meetings concluded with several concrete steps that can be taken through this collaboration:
 1. Establish an HIV disease management Certification Program for medical staff in Pakistan in consultation with CFAR and local universities in Pakistan under WHO guidelines specific to Pakistan.
 2. Create training and prevention programs through training ‘master trainers’ and modeling programs after U.S. success stories.
 3. Plan conference segments at the national level to educate medical personnel on HIV/AIDS and coinfections.

Collaborating with the federal level of the NACP will also help to facilitate engagement with local institutions and academia. The goal of this partnership is to create sustainable solutions to prevent further HIV transmissions in Pakistan.
 - **Visit to Larkana, Sindh, Pakistan, July 2019:** The HIV/AIDS Communications Project Team is thankful to the federal and provincial governments and agencies to facilitate this opportunity to visit Larkana alongside the World Health Organization (WHO) delegation on July 29, 2019. We attended Dr. Azra Pacheco’s and Dr. Sikandar Memon’s presentations on July 29th regarding the current HIV situation in Sindh. According to the presentation proposed strategic response from the Larkana Health Department, the World Health Organization (WHO), and other institutions was well underway.

We were glad to know from this presentation that there are enough resources and help from WHO and other international agencies to deal with this epidemic and team is working hard to achieve its goals.

However, in our team’s view, this epidemic is an opportunity to, as a nation; begin brainstorming more sustainable and long-term solutions to deal with epidemic health issues. The project that our team has designed and implemented focuses on sustainable solutions to healthcare weaknesses in Pakistan to deal with epidemic outbreaks like this. We believe that visiting affected areas for a few weeks and providing one-time trainings to providers is a good strategy for quick, short-term rapid response, but it does not

provide long-term and sustainable solutions to the health issues that Pakistan's population faces.

Following additional thoughts and observations were submitted to the NACP and local authorities on 8/23/2019:

1. There is a strong need to follow HIV+ patients diagnosed in previous two outbreaks as well as current outbreak to make sure they are on antiretroviral treatment and have suppressed viral loads. A robust HIV disease management and patient retention in care tracking system is needed to achieve this goal. Ideally, this system should include information about patient visits to the clinics, medications taken, and HIV viral load results data. This system should be available to all HIV care providers for proper disease management.
 2. There is a need to increase health education related to HIV and other infectious diseases like, Hepatitis, and TB. Increasing awareness at all levels of population including adults and children, is crucial to controlling infections. Public discussions and television campaigns are possible first steps to increase awareness about spread of infectious diseases. Local area medical schools can also play vital roles in this kind of activities.
 3. We plan to develop courses for healthcare providers to train and refresh their knowledge about the infectious diseases and related modes of transmissions. This can play a vital role to control further outbreaks. The strategy would be to introduce infectious disease certification programs in health and medical institutes in Sindh and greater Pakistan.
 4. For children, our team recommends adding more health education modules in public schools and advising private schools to revise their health education curricula. This education could include basic information on sanitation and the dangers of communicable diseases.
 5. Class level community service projects can be designed to increase awareness about public health issues in primary and secondary schools as well as institutions of higher education including medical colleges.
 6. There is a need for a proper waste disposal system in hospitals health care facilities. This will help to reduce contamination and keep patients and hospital staff safe.
 7. Proper allocation of resources on continuous cleaning of hospital premises is another area which should be considered.
 8. We need a comprehensive program and training for proper disposal of needles to prevent reuse which may be the main vehicles for the cross contamination.
 9. There is a need to organize International HIV and infectious disease conferences at different levels. We plan to help facilitate this wherever possible.
- **Engaging local academic institutions:** To create more sustainable solutions to the prevention of HIV in Pakistan, our team has initiated collaborations with several academic institutions to train the next generation of health care providers on HIV and to

encourage research into the socioeconomic dimensions of HIV in Pakistan. During July 2019, our team met with several institutions to discuss plans for broader engagement:

1. July 22, 2019: Members of the HIV/AIDS Communications team met three faculty members of School of Social Sciences and Humanities (S3H) at National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan. Project Director Fizza Gillani was invited to become an external advisor for the PhD program and in return, the department has promised to guide at least one PhD student per year to work on economic dimensions of the HIV disease in Pakistan.
 2. July 25, 2019: Project Director Fizza Gillani was invited to give a talk on “HIV in Pakistan: What We Know” at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE). Many PIDE PhD students and faculty members attended the lecture, and following the presentation, discussed possible research topics pertaining to HIV prevention and broader topics in health economics. Fizza also discussed the possibility of starting a Data Science Master’s program and strengthening the existing “Population and Public Policies” Department with department heads at PIDE.
 3. On Tuesday July 30th, 2019, our team met with a private school system administration group, which runs more than 1500 schools in impoverished areas throughout Pakistan. Our team will work with this group to add a health education module to be included in their regular curriculum.
- **HIV talks/presentations at different forums:** So far, our team has done presentations or talks at the following forums. Main aim was to start HIV awareness and communications among different communities.
 1. “Healthcare Research Options for Young Physicians: HIV Communications Project:”; presented as part of the Young Physicians Seminar Series at 17th Annual Meeting of the Association of Pakistani Physicians of New England (APPNE), Boston, MA, USA, April 20th, 2019 (Fizza Gillani).
 2. “HIV In Pakistan: Past, Present, and Future” a CME lecture delivered at the Association of Physicians of Pakistani Descent of North America (APPNA), 42nd Annual Convention, Orlando, Florida, July 5th, 2019 (Fizza Gillani).
 3. “HIV in Pakistan: What we Know”, an invited lecture delivered at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad, Pakistan, July 25th, 2019 (Fizza Gillani).

Looking forward, we are interested in continuing our collaboration with the NACP and other organizations, hosting a national HIV conference in collaboration with different institutions and facilitating collaboration between academia and the medical community in Pakistan.

We are proposing the following next steps:

- **HIV Certification Courses:** Our team will create HIV certification courses derived from the webinar series delivered from May 2019 to June 2019 under WHO guidelines for Pakistan. These certification courses will be delivered in conjunction with local

institutions in Pakistan to train medical personnel who are not HIV specialists on basic standards of care and prevention of HIV in Pakistan (we'll start working on this in a few more weeks and will invite all webinar guest speakers to work with us)

- **National Conference to Raise Awareness on HIV in Pakistan:** Our team plans to collaborate with some local partners to host a HIV awareness and prevention conference at the end of this year. Some possible local partners include The Health Services Academy and a few educational institutions in Pakistan. We are investigating more possible partners and some funding sources to do so.
- **Continued Engagement with Academia:** The project team intends to facilitate greater engagement between academic institutions and the medical community in Pakistan, following the U.S. model of collaboration.
 - Our team will continue to work with different higher education institutions to encourage more MBBS, Masters, and PhD students to work together on cross-disciplinary platforms, e.g., helping more students to investigate different areas related to infectious diseases including economic burden of different infectious diseases in Pakistan.
 - At early education levels, our team intends to engage with primary and secondary level school systems to update their health education curricula. The goal of this would be to ensure that sanitation and communicable diseases are sufficiently covered in health education modules at early education levels. (Ms. Isra Hussain will lead this activity)

Project Team:

- **Project Director:** Fizza Gillani, PhD*
- **Project Mentors:** Timothy Flanigan*, MD, Susan Cu-Uvin, MD*, Jerome Larkin, MD*
- **Other Brown University Faculty Members:** HIV specialists Physicians at the Division of Infectious Diseases.
- **Project Team Members:** Rizwan Naeem, MD; Syed Iftikhar Hussain, MD; Aziz Soomro, MD; Farooq Soomro, MD; Isra Hussain (team reporter)
- **Institutions:** Providence-Boston Center for AIDS Research and Brown University, Rhode Island, USA; Jinnah Sindh Medical University (JSMU), Karachi, Pakistan and its Alumni Association of North America (JSMUAANA).
- **Additional Volunteers:** Monika Karera, MBBS; Meghan McCarthy, MD

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