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Community engagement in HIV vaccine research as a treatment strategy among men who have sex with men (MSM)

Introduction: One of the challenges HIV vaccine researchers face is the grapple with the practical need to recruit, engage and sustain the research participants in the HIV vaccine trials and a broader social good regarding the safety of the participants and community perception on clinical research. Understanding the disjunction between the study concepts and participants level of clinical research literacy will pave the way for a successful HIV vaccine research. A meaningful and extensive engagement of the community is not only dependent on how researchers address the challenges associated with the participants' protection and involvement but also their engagement in the research process. Community engagement on HIV vaccine unearths salient implication of the research, with the potential to inform HIV prevention and treatment policy frameworks.

Purpose: This study aims to identify how the meaningful community engagement in HIV vaccine research affects the vaccine trial outcomes among the MSM in Kenya.

Methodology: The study was qualitative. Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) researchers were engaged as key informants. The MSM, who are volunteers to the trials, also responded to questionnaires.

Findings: The study established that men who have sex with men (MSM) and those living with HIV in particular, face rampant discrimination and high levels of social stigma. For a long time,

such situations compounded the challenges of the disclosure which have significant effects on their participation in the HIV vaccine trials. However, there was a gradual realization of some change in perception among the trial participants after research literacy training by the KEMRI.

Conclusion & Significance: Research on HIV vaccine is, therefore, an investment whose benefits transcends a promise of prevention and should uphold community engagement strategies. In Kenya, the vaccine science contributes to an array of research driven discoveries; and such breakthrough incrementally empowers the HIV affected communities to a new narrative, which allows their voices to influence health care policies. Recommendations are made to researchers to engage the community.

Speaker Biography

S Louise Cosby was appointed as Head of Virology Branch at the Agri-Food and Kelvin Owange Otieno is a Community Healthcare Consultant with inclination on Social Research. He has extensive experience in conducting research and training on organizational capacity, particularly on tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. His experience in psychosocial development has positioned him to work in multisectoral setups including mental hospitals, rehabilitation centers and leading social research institutions in Kenya. He is passionate about creating a nexus between medical research and social research and further making medical research language more palatable to the end-user. He is currently developing curriculum guiding food producers on the production of healthy foods in Kenya.

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