

## DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE COUPLES-BASED INTERVENTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project is funded by a CAPS innovative grant. Prior work in South Africa has indicated that heterosexual couples are facing a myriad of issues within the HIV epidemic. Couples are having to face issues such as HIV testing, fertility in the context of one or both partners being HIV+, and coping with being HIV+ in an area of high stigma. The project aimed to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews with couples (n=20) and key informants (n=12) regarding the feasibility and acceptability of a comprehensive couples-based intervention. Key issues will be explored to determine potential interest for intervention content. The research is based at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and the Perinatal HIV Research Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The project's primary aims:

- Determine the ideal components of an integrated package delivering comprehensive HIV reproductive health services to heterosexual couples in Soweto, South Africa
- Explore the feasibility and acceptability of such a program via in-depth interviews with potential target audience members and key informants.

### SIGNIFICANCE

Although South Africa is one of the countries most impacted by the HIV epidemic, very few studies have examined HIV from a couples-based perspective. There is little to no information about how couples may communicate about sexual issues (e.g., outside partners) and how couples-based testing is perceived by the community. In addition, few studies have examined relationship dynamics as predictors of HIV risk behavior in this setting. Preliminary findings from other research by the investigators have shown that a more comprehensive approach may be needed to successfully tackle the multiple issues facing heterosexual couples in sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, the only couples-focused services available in this context are VCT for HIV. Couples are rarely involved in reproductive health services, which focus almost exclusively on women. Preliminary data indicate that VCT counselors who see couples are overwhelmed by the needs expressed by couples—which reach far beyond the training and scope of a couples-based VCT session. Thus, further investigation into comprehensive services for couples is needed. Such information would investigate not only predictors and context of HIV risk behavior, but also HIV treatment, reproductive health, and communication about these issues.

**PROJECT RECRUITMENT DATES:** We have currently (February 2008) completed interviews with 20 couples, and are beginning to examine the data. Key informant interviews will be completed by April 2008.

**PROJECT END DATE:** June 2009