



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

5 September 2024

Significant number of blood donors testing positive for HIV are also on antiretroviral treatment – UCT study

People living with HIV (PLWH) would present to donate both as a general wish to help others and also wanting to donate specifically for other PLWH

Approximately 10% of the blood donors who test positive for HIV are also on antiretroviral drugs, suggesting that they were aware of their HIV status at the time of donating, a University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD research into the intersection of the HIV epidemic and blood donation in South Africa has found.

The findings are based on UCT graduate Karin van den Berg's research for her PhD in [medicine](#) at UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences. These findings were aligned with what was seen in other countries such as the USA.

Van den Berg, who graduated on Tuesday, 3 September, however allayed fears by explaining that blood donation from donors who are aware of their HIV status does not increase the risk of HIV transmission through blood donation as the testing performed in South Africa will identify these donations ensuring that they are removed from the inventory.

"However, the only way to identify donations made by people living with HIV already on anti-retroviral drugs as opposed to those newly diagnosed with HIV is to perform testing for anti-retroviral drugs, which is an expensive, manual test. So, another part of this research was to determine the benefit one would derive from adding this expensive testing," said Van den Berg.

She said they determined that adding testing for anti-retroviral drugs would have a marginal impact on determining the true incidence of HIV among blood donors in settings with a high background incidence of HIV, such as in South Africa.

"For me, though, the most important question was to better understand why people living with HIV would present to donate. We found that there were two main reasons, which included both a general wish to help others and wanting to donate specifically for other PLWH as well as a lack of privacy that presented some donors from disclosing their status," said Van den Berg.

The study was undertaken to better understand the interaction between people who are aware of their HIV-positive status and who are already on anti-retroviral drugs and blood donation.

“Specifically we wanted to establish how often people living with HIV are donating blood and what the impact of this behaviour might be on the testing protocols used to identify persons with recently acquired HIV and the models we use to calculate the incidence of HIV. But most importantly, we needed to better understand why people living with HIV already of treatment would be present to and then donate blood despite the various systems in place to limit such donation,” she said.

Van den Berg said she did her undergraduate training during the late eighties and early nineties and lived through the evolution of the HIV epidemic in South Africa. “Later, when I joined the South African National Blood Service, I was struck by the profound impact HIV had on blood services not only in South Africa but across the world. It was during an international research collaboration further investigating how HIV influences both blood donation as well as the demand for blood, that we became aware that there were some people living with HIV who presented and then donated blood despite systems aimed at limiting people at risk of HIV from donating blood.

“It became important for us to better understand this behaviour, how often it was happening, why it was happening and then also the impact it might have on the safety of the blood supply,” she said.

Van den Berg said historically, the blood services spent a lot of time educating the public and blood donors not to use the blood service as an HIV testing centre. “The very low prevalence of HIV among blood donors is testament to the success of these systems. However, as we became aware of an increasing number of people living with HIV already on treatment presenting to donate blood, we wanted to better understand this phenomenon so that the blood services could implement systems and processes to limit such donations”.

“Understanding why people who are aware of their HIV status present to donate blood may help us develop strategies that would limit such blood donations without adding to the existing stigma these communities face already,” she hinted.

Van den Berg said the intersection of HIV and blood donation has shaped the policies of blood transfusion services for decades.

“In South Africa, the HIV epidemic not only drive the demand for blood but it also significantly impact the ability of the blood services to collect sufficient blood given the very high prevalence of HIV in the communities from which our blood donors are recruited. As the HIV epidemic in South Africa changes, so does its impact on the blood services.

“Historically, the blood services focused heavily on ensuring the public does not use blood donation as a means of obtaining an HIV test, however with the rollout of the ‘test and treat’ strategy, this is less of a concern. Today, we need to ensure that public understands that people living with HIV should not donate blood but also work on strategies to minimise the stigma that still surround an HIV diagnosis and make it easier for those among us who are living with HIV to safely disclose such information,” she said.

She said the lessons learned from this research will help shape future policies and strategies in blood services to improve any situation where disclosing sensitive information may be necessary.

“For me, this body of work left me with the overall impression of people inherently being the same; with the same challenges, the same wants and needs and the same desire to give back to the communities within which they live and operate. Altruism is not the exclusive territory of HIV-negative people. However, HIV stigma, even in a country with a background prevalence of ~15%, still dramatically shapes the daily behaviour of people living with HIV. Regardless of all the powerful science we have available, failure to address the stigma of HIV will doom any attempts to address blood donation by people living with HIV already on treatment to failure,” she concluded.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Cell: (072) 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za