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An analysis of HIV risk factors amongst the mentally challenged Populations of Botswana: Implications for improved care and well-being

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Studies have revealed high sero-prevalence of HIV infection in people with serious chronic mental illnesses (WHO, 2008). The purpose of this eight months exploratory study was to explore the HIV risk factors among mentally challenged populations in Botswana and determine the preventative strategies to address their vulnerability to the HIV virus. The study employed mixed methods and utilized a multi stage sampling approach that involved purposive selection of districts and respondents. A total of 238 participants; comprising of fifteen (15) mentally challenged, fifteen caretakers (15), three (3) Nurses and one (1) medical officer per a selected health district. A combined methodological framework of phenomenology, PEN 3 and relevant concepts of individual constructivism, the Syndemic model drawing on the interaction of mental challenges and socio-environmental determinants of HIV/AIDS were adapted to inform the study. A major finding of this study, from the caregivers' perspective, and some of the clients, is that the mentally challenged populations of Botswana are amongst the groups most vulnerable to risks of HIV/AIDS. Noted risk factors include lack of HIV knowledge and information processing skills, multiple sexual partnerships, sexual harassment exacerbated by lack of reporting, alcohol and substance abuse, low condom use, and weak social support at family, community and health facility level. The study recommended clients support from family up to community and government levels.

Keywords: HIV risk factors, mentally challenged populations.

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