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HIV SELF-TESTING IN VIETNAM

Making it easier for those most at risk to know their HIV status

The HIV epidemic in Vietnam is concentrated among key populations: men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender women (TGW), people who inject drugs (PWID), and female sex workers (FSW). These populations face multiple barriers to HIV testing, including fear of stigma and discrimination. Until recently, the rates of annual HIV testing at facility-based services was low, at approximately 30 percent. HIV self-testing (HIVST) is helping to overcome these barriers by providing a quick and confidential option that can also accelerate new HIV case detection in Vietnam.

“If you go for an HIV test at a normal clinic, then people automatically judge you and assume that you have done something bad—that you sleep with a lot of people or inject drugs—rather than that you are just taking a normal health precaution or check-up. Self-testing gives people another option, where they don’t have to face real or perceived stigma in public.”

Le Minh Thanh, head of G-link, a civil society organization (CSO) supporting HIV self-testing

HIV SELF-TESTING: ANOTHER PATHWAY TO 90-90-90

Vietnam was the first country in Asia to adopt the global 90-90-90 targets toward ending the HIV epidemic. The PATH-led Healthy Markets initiative, funded by the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), works closely with Vietnam’s Ministry of Health (MOH) to identify and introduce new HIV testing strategies that increase and accelerate case detection in order to achieve the first “90”.

Healthy Markets and the Vietnam Administration for HIV/AIDS Control (VAAC) began piloting lay provider HIV testing services in 2015, with considerable success. In May 2016, Healthy Markets and civil society organizations (CSOs) led by key populations (KPs) introduced HIVST alongside lay testing. KPs can now access HIVST kits and information at 20 CSOs, and through online mail order.

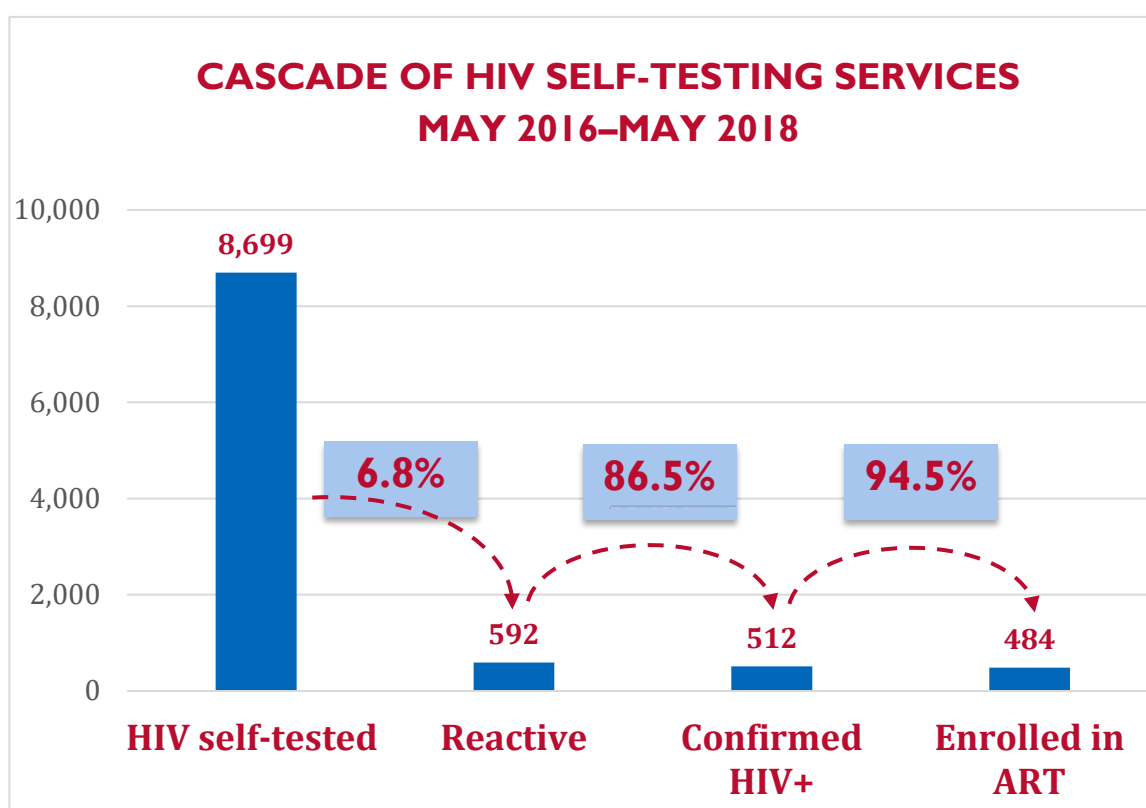
HIVST services are promoted through Healthy Markets’ KP-specific communication campaigns, which include dynamic co-created content and online peer counseling through social media channels (like Facebook and popular MSM dating apps Grindr and Hornet), television content in partnership with MTV Vietnam, and CSO-led face-to-face events. At the start, HIVST was delivered through KP-led CSOs where clients could opt to test in private or with whatever degree of assistance they required from trained staff. Now, HIVST is also being made available through partner distribution as part of index testing, and will soon be available through pharmacy-based sales.

HIVST PILOT: KEY FINDINGS

HIVST AND CSOS FIND MORE POSITIVE CASES AND SUPPORT LINKAGE TO TREATMENT

Introducing HIVST in conjunction with KP-led CSO services has resulted in a high HIV-positive yield, compared to facility and HIV lay testing, and high rates of linkages from self-testing to diagnosis and care. Between May 2016 and May 2018, **8,699 people HIV self-tested**. Of these people, **6.8 percent received a reactive result** and were referred for confirmatory testing. 86.5 percent of the people who received reactive results received an HIV confirmation and **94.5 percent of those diagnosed with HIV were enrolled in antiretroviral therapy (ART)**.

In contrast, conventional HIV testing among KPs resulted in a 1.6 percent yield of positive cases in 2016, while HIV lay testing results in a reactive case yield of about 4 percent.



An evaluation of the pilot (from June 2016 to September 2017), found the primary reason (74 percent) individuals opted for HIVST was because it offers privacy and confidentiality.

“I decided to choose self-testing as it is quick and can be done privately. With conventional testing, I have to actually come to a public facility at a certain time, which may not be convenient for me. In the past, I have sometimes also had to see not-so-nice doctors and counselors. The counseling by the CSO was open and friendly, and I could take the test whenever it was convenient for me. The information is confidential, and I know that when I know my status, I will be supported by the CSO staff.”

HIV self-testing client, HCMC

HIVST IS ACCEPTABLE TO KEY POPULATIONS AND RESULTS ARE READ WITH EASE

More than 97 percent of people participating in the HIVST evaluation stated that they found HIVST to be acceptable and that they would recommend it to their peers. The pilot offers a choice of a blood-based (Alere Determine™ HIV-1/2) or oral-fluid assay (OraQuick Rapid HIV-1/2) test. Nearly 43 percent of the 936 evaluation participants opted for the oral-fluid test.

In a study with 790 self-testers, 64 percent reported difficulty using Alere Determine, and 21 percent reported the same in using OraQuick. However, in 98 percent of cases with Determine and 97 percent with OraQuick, self-testers' interpretation of the results were in concordance with that of a trained observer.

HIVST APPEALS TO FIRST-TIME AND INFREQUENT HIV TESTERS

Among the 936 HIVST evaluation participants, 54.7 percent were first-time testers—although this rate was higher among FSW, PWID, and their sex partners than it was in MSM. Among those who had tested before, 24.1 percent had not tested in the previous 12 months.



Many first time testers find out about HIV self-testing through adverts such as this one, on Healthy Markets-supported Facebook channels, pages run by testing providers, and popular dating apps for men who has sex with men, like Grindr. PATH

NEXT STEPS: TAKING HIVST TO SCALE IN VIETNAM

The results of Healthy Markets' HIVST pilot have led to the inclusion of community-based testing in VAAC's action plan for 2016–2020 and a commitment by Vietnam's MOH to commit to scaling up HIVST services nationwide. Importantly, Healthy Markets partnered with the MOH to develop national community-based HIV testing guidelines that include essential steps to make self-testing available in Vietnam. These guidelines were approved by the MOH in April 2018.

To bridge the gap between the successful pilot and long-term sustainability of HIVST, the MOH has also included HIVST into the next application for support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. This funding will enable Vietnam to expand availability of HIVST through the public health system. PEPFAR is also committed to increasing access to HIVST from 2018 to 2020 through CSOs and the public and private sectors.

OPENING UP THE MARKET FOR HIVST KITS

If HIVST is to be sustainable in Vietnam, both the supply and demand of HIVST must be consistent and commercially viable. Healthy Markets is assisting the government to develop an enabling policy environment for both HIVST providers and HIVST kit manufacturers and distributors, and engaging with manufacturers, distributors, and retailers to develop a viable commercial market for HIVST.

In a study conducted by Healthy Markets in 2015, 80 percent of 2,557 KPs (including MSM, FSW, PWID, and their sex partners) were willing to pay for HIVST. PWID were willing to pay up to US\$3.9, FSW US\$4.3, and MSM US\$5.4. This study and the acceptability data above show that the demand for commercially available HIVST is clearly present. However, as HIVST is new to Vietnam, so are HIVST kits; they are not yet legally registered for import, use, and sale in Vietnam. Healthy Markets provides market entry support to HIVST kit manufacturers to ensure that a choice of high quality, affordable oral and blood-based tests are available in the commercial and public sector.

Developing a sustainable supply of HIVST kits in Vietnam also requires fostering a retail supply chain. Healthy Markets aims to make high-quality and affordable kits available through private-sector retail outlets, including pharmacies and online market places. This also serves to expand access to HIVST for those who are not reached by clinics, CSOs, or social enterprises.

Healthy Markets has launched partnerships with popular private-sector pharmacy chains Pharmacy and MEDiCARE. Pharmacy is the biggest pharmacy chain with more than 70 stores in Vietnam and aiming to have more than 500 stores nationwide within the next five years; MEDiCARE is not far behind, with 59 stores. These pharmacies plan to sell HIVST kits in their stores as soon as HIV self-testing products are registered and available in the market.



Healthy Markets' partnerships with private pharmacies are important early steps in making HIV self-testing more accessible in Vietnam. PATH

In the interim, in order to test the market and KPs' willingness to pay for HIVST kits in pharmacies, Healthy Markets and OraSure Technologies are partnering to offer fee-based oral-fluid tests in these stores. Before this pilot begins, Healthy Markets is working with these pharmacies to develop simple protocols and train pharmacists to provide HIVST information and referrals for reactive cases. This partnership is the first step in demonstrating that making HIVST kits available in pharmacies is a feasible model in Vietnam.

For more information about HIV self-testing in Vietnam, contact the Healthy Markets team at HM@path.org.

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