

Feedback report – APH QoC Travel Grant 2022

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Background

Timely diagnosis remains one of the key factors in curbing the global HIV epidemic. It not only improves individual health outcomes (late HIV diagnosis is associated with increased hospital admission and healthcare uptake, morbidity, mortality, and poorer response to therapy), but also helps prevent onward transmission, as individuals with HIV who are on adequate treatment can no longer pass on the virus through sexual contact. Optimal HIV testing strategies have therefore been a major focal point for interventions aiming to end the HIV epidemic.

In Suriname, it is estimated that only 52% of the estimated 4950 people living with HIV in 2010-2015 knew their status, although the number of undiagnosed individuals may be much higher. Of the individuals diagnosed, an estimated 63% were receiving treatment, and 81% of those on treatment had reached viral suppression. This means that only 27% of all people living with HIV were adequately treated, thereby decreasing morbidity, mortality and onward transmission. Meanwhile, optimal testing is hampered by the fact that there is not enough capacity for routine community HIV screening or universal patient screening available in Suriname.

To improve this so-called cascade of HIV diagnosis and care in Suriname (i.e. all elements involved in the diagnosis and treatment), several projects have been recently initiated by the department of infectious diseases (ID) at the AZP. The AZP is the only academic hospital in the country, and one of five hospitals in the city of Paramaribo. There is currently one full-time ID specialist working at the AZP, and a total of two ID specialists in the country. Moreover, hospitals in Suriname are currently not equipped with electronic patient files, and no budget is available for HIV research and interventions, making a large Quality of Care intervention project challenging. However, considering the current state of the HIV cascade of testing and care, improving the proportion of people with HIV that is diagnosed and linked to care will likely greatly benefit public health.



Main entrance of the AZP hospital in Paramaribo, Suriname

Activities

With the use of the APH QoC Travel Grant 2022, I visited the academic hospital in Paramaribo, Suriname (AZP) from 30 October until 3 December 2022, with the aim to support local infectious disease specialists with a research project on the implementation of indicator condition guided testing for HIV in the hospital setting in Paramaribo, Suriname. This project was based largely on the PROTEST 2.0 project by the H-TEAM that was concluded in Amsterdam this year, and of which the results were recently published in Lancet regional health Europe (Bogers et al. 2022, doi: 10.1016/j.lanepe.2022.100515).

In this project, the aim is to assess (and subsequently improve) HIV testing rates in patients presenting with so-called indicator conditions, which are conditions that are associated with HIV, and in which HIV testing is therefore warranted. Upon my arrival, the study protocol, local feasibility checks, recruitment of students for data collection and initiating collaboration with stakeholders were already completed.

During my visit, I completed the following activities:

- Developing, building, testing and activating an electronic case report form (eCRF) format and database for all data collection for this study
- Trial-running data collection on patients with bacterial pneumonia and preparing patient selection for inclusion
- Trial-running data collection on patients with cervical carcinoma
- Assessing feasibility and completeness of data-collection from paper patient files collected from the hospital archives
- Building, testing and activating an electronic case report form format and database for all data collection for a secondary study on patients with tuberculosis
- Collecting data on HIV biomarkers among patients with HIV and histoplasmosis for a secondary study on histoplasmosis co-infection in patients with HIV
- Setting up procedures to ensure data safety, including drafting of confidentiality agreement for students working with data in this study
- Daily supervision of a research intern collecting data, training student on use of eCRF and data collection
- Writing comprehensive student manual on study background, data collection and management for future students working on data collection for this project



Hallway in the hospital's patient archives

Sustainability and further work

The results of this project will be used as a basis to improve indicator condition-guided testing for HIV in Paramaribo. Additionally, findings will be reported in peer-reviewed journals by the local senior researcher/ID specialist. The work done during my visit can serve as a base for the further completion of this project. The ultimate aim of the project is to cause a sustained improvement in HIV testing in the hospital setting in Paramaribo, Suriname.