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HEALTH

IST's a lifeline for rural fight against HIV and TB

By June 2, 2024

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Story by Abigail Tembo, Health Editor

THE Government and its partners in the health sector has introduced the Integrated Specimen Transport (IST) system meant to ensure efficient delivery of critical samples, leading to quicker diagnoses and treatment of diseases.

Remote villages in Zimbabwe once faced a heartbreaking reality.

Essential healthcare services, particularly crucial tests for HIV and TB, were hampered by slow and unreliable sample transportation.

This resulted in agonising waits for results, hindering treatment and jeopardising health outcomes for patients.

The story has, however changed after the introduction of a fleet of dedicated motorbike riders under the Integrated Specimen Transport (IST) programme.

Samples can now be delivered quickly and efficiently, leading to quicker diagnoses and improved health outcomes for patients.

"Since 2010 I have been getting treatment at this hospital as well as my ARV's but I am happy with the positive changes which are taking place at this hospital because I know I would have died a long time ago because now I feel healthy again because we are getting back our viral load results quickly thanks to the bikers.

"Before the bikers came our sample results would take weeks to come sometimes they will never come and you will get countless tests done but no result. But now we are happy because of the quick result turnover.

"I am a TB patient and i have been sick for a long time. We used to get our tests done at the local clinic and the tests would take ages to come and sometimes the results wont even come. but ever since the bikes came through the IST programme they started collecting the samples from our clinics . Now I am recovering and am feeling better," said patients who spoke to ZBC News.

48-year-old Christmas Muchanga, one of the five riders operating in Gokwe North District, clocks over 160 kilometers daily, collecting and delivering specimens from the 22 facilities to the testing hub at Gokwe North District Hospital.

"I ride at least 162 kilometers (km) daily to deliver and collect specimens and sample results from health facilities around here. First thing when I get to a clinic or health facility, I log into my tablet to notify the system that I have arrived at the clinic with the samples.

"Before I departed for this clinic I also logged in because this system is tracked and when I log in the information is transmitted there and then," she said.

Director Laboratory Services in the Ministry of Health and Child Care, Dr Raiva Simbi speaks on the scope of the programme.

"Before the IST, we had a haphazard way of transporting samples, we had no formal way of transporting samples. One of our biggest challenges was the turnaround time for results.

"Samples would take long to get to the testing hubs and results would take long to get back to the testing sites to the clinicians also it would take a lot of time for the results to be used for clinical interventions.

We also had no way of tracking samples along the way and several samples would then be lost. said there had been a significant improvement in lab services since the beginning of the programme.

We were using HIV viral load testing as a tracer test and we have managed to reduce our turnaround time from as much as three months to 11 to 15 days. In some instances, at the lower levels, the turnaround time is reduced to even a single day because of information systems that we have also deployed."

The IST programme being implemented by the Ministry of Health and Child Care together with technical partners, the Biomedical Research and Training Institute and UNDP extends far beyond Gokwe North.

A total of 280 motorbikes and eight provincial vehicles have been availed so far under the IST programme to ensure timely diagnosis and treatment for HIV, TB and other illnesses countrywide.

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