

# GOVERNMENT POLICY ON MANDATORY HIV / AIDS TESTING: “**TEST AND TREAT, TOWARDS ENDING AIDS**” FROM A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

## PRESS STATEMENT

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The prevalence of HIV and AIDS continues to pose a major challenge to many nations especially in the sub-Saharan Africa. In Zambia, strong Government interventions over the past years and the enactment of various national HIV/AIDS/STI/TB policies and institutions have given rise to high levels of awareness on HIV and AIDS and effective interventions at different levels. The Republican President Mr. Edgar Chagwa Lungu has declared that it is now mandatory for every Zambian seeking any medical attention to be tested for HIV/AIDS, and told the results without consent. The President further stated that, “*The HIV scourge has continued to pose one of the biggest threats to the country’s development and that Government is up to the task and has embarked on a transformative shift through emphasizing HIV voluntary counselling and testing to HIV testing and treatment.*” This pronouncement comes on the backbone of the 2017 theme for the HIV Testing, Counseling and Treatment Day: ‘**Test and Treat, towards ending AIDS**’. Government has further stated that the HIV Testing, Counseling and

Treatment Day commonly known as the HTCT will be commemorated every year on the 15th day of August as a symbol of government’s resolve to end AIDS in Zambia by the year 2030.

According to statistics in the Seventh National Development Plan (7NDP) Zambia has an estimated number of 1.2 million people living with HIV. However, the country has been able to stabilize the epidemic with HIV prevalence decreasing from 15.6 percent in 2002 to 11.6 percent in 2016. Between 2009 and 2016 the rate of new HIV infections dropped by more than 41%.

### **Mandatory testing debates**

Mandatory HIV testing has been a contentious issue from the perspective of health-care providers. It can be argued that mandatory testing benefits both those found to be infected and those at risk of becoming infected. Others argue that testing a patient against his or her will may result in the violation of ethical as well as legal code. In addition to ethical and legal

concerns, if a patient at risk for HIV becomes aware that they could be tested without their consent, they may avoid contact with health-care professionals, which could result in a net public health loss. Despite the heated debate over mandatory HIV testing, many countries are currently operating mandatory testing programmes. Mandatory HIV testing presents a new gateway to HIV prevention, care and treatment. Expanded access to HIV testing will provide important opportunities for ensuring universal access to knowledge of HIV, enhancing access to HIV prevention activities, including prevention of mother to child transmission, management of Sexually Transmitted Infections, condoms, medical male circumcision for HIV negative men and behavioural interventions. However, HIV testing needs to be part of a “package” of support and care services. This needs to begin in the health care facilities and extend into the community. It is therefore important to explore health-care providers’ attitudes toward mandatory HIV testing for different patients and various factors associated with providers’ attitudes toward mandatory HIV testing in health-care settings. This will offer suggestions to help policy-makers design more targeted interventions to help health-care providers deliver better services to People Living with HIV/AIDS in Zambia that will feed into community initiatives that will translate into significant reductions in incidence and prevalence rates. Mandatory testing would also help in improving early diagnosis of HIV and linkage to appropriate care, support and timely initiation of antiretroviral treatment (ART), in order to improve health of people living with HIV, prevent onward transmission to HIV negative partners, including vertical transmission.

The mandatory testing policy decision undertaken by the Government aims at ensuring that, as many people as possible know their HIV status and also assist the Government to plan for intervention with accurate information. We must understand that this broad decision prioritizes HIV testing and immediate commencement of retention of antiretroviral treatment to all Zambians living with HIV. Mandatory testing has already been in existence for pregnant mothers and blood donors. This has assisted in knowing the status of expectant mothers thereby providing interventions to prevent mother to child transmission and improving quality of life for families.

It is also important to note that Zambia is committed to the 2016 High Level Meeting Political Declaration that reaffirms member states’ commitment to ending AIDS by 2030 in solidarity with the global community and ensuring country ownership, leadership and accountability. This commitment aims at achieving the 90-90-90 treatment targets by 2020. The 90-90-90 targets refer to 90 percent of people living with HIV know their HIV status, 90 percent of people tested positive for HIV get access to treatment services and 90 percent of people on antiretroviral treatment achieve HIV viral load suppression.

By requiring people to be tested for HIV, the public health community would gain valuable information on how many people are infected and what groups are most at risk, significantly aiding prevention programs. By requiring everyone to be tested, the stigma associated with those walking into an HIV testing clinic is eliminated. It is also vital to note that HIV testing is only beneficial if it is accompanied by proper education and counseling. This policy decision therefore needs to be accompanied by adequate guidelines especially in ensuring counselling and treatment measures.

In conclusion research has also found that counselling and testing is a cost-effective method of prevention and has a vital role to play within a comprehensive range of measures for HIV/AIDS prevention and the provision of care and support. The potential benefits of mandatory counselling and testing for individuals include improved health conditions through good nutritional advice, early/prompt access to ART, treatment of opportunistic infections, preventive therapy for tuberculosis and other sexually transmitted infections; psychosocial support and ability to cope with the consequences of HIV/AIDS. This provides individuals with opportunities of awareness on safer options for reproduction, reducing mother-to-child transmission, and infant feeding; motivation to initiate or maintain safer sexual and drug related behaviours among others. Furthermore, mandatory counselling and testing provides an opportunity to reduce the spread, burden and the stigma of HIV/AIDS



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