

Do more to debunk dangerous HIV misconceptions

UGANDA has been a global success story in the fight against HIV and AIDS since the first case was discovered on Lake Victoria's shores in the 1980s.

However, the health ministry says some Ugandan women believe contraceptive implants protect against HIV infection. This revelation is scandalous, exposes the fact that there is a knowledge gap threatening to undo decades of progress in our fight against AIDS. It is also an indicator that our HIV education efforts need to be taken a notch higher. This misconception is threatening to derail the country's 2030 95-95-95 (95% of people living with HIV knowing their status, 95% on treatment, and 95% virally suppressed) target. As of 2023, Uganda's HIV prevalence stood at 5.1%, with alarming disparities: Women (6.2%) bear a heavier burden than men (4.1%), and young women aged 15-24 are infected at twice the rate of their male peers. Regionally, central Uganda reports 6.5% prevalence, while western reaches 7.3%. However, most disheartening is the fact that 30% of



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new infections happen among adolescent girls and young women, a group being targeted by the expanding community health workers' (CHEWs) programme providing implants.

This knowledge gap raises several questions, including

whether we have collectively slackened in our HIV prevention efforts. Since funding for HIV programmes has waned, have we become complacent? While new infections have declined from 85,000 annually in 2010 to about 40,000 today.

We must remember the early years of the epidemic when thousands died without treatment and must reawaken vigilance. The CHEWs programme, with its 20,363 digitised community health workers, represents a lot of potential, but we would not want to reduce pregnancies and at the same time increase HIV infections.

Therefore, all stakeholders, especially the Government and partners, should ramp up sensitisation drives about contraception and HIV prevention in all community health programmes; engage men to break the silence around sexual health; undertake campaigns targeting youth with myth-debunking content. We should also integrate HIV testing with family planning services and strengthen school-based sensitisation.