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TACKLING HIV/AIDS IN UGANDA BY STRENGTHENING HEALTH SYSTEMS

Ever since the first cases were documented in the early eighties, HIV/AIDS has taken an enormous toll around the world. Global campaigns to address the epidemic have advanced in recent years bringing about greater international political commitment accompanied by increased financial resources through: The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), World Bank loans among other international donors and multilateral institutions. However, much still remains to be done if we are to achieve the broad goal of **"universal access to comprehensive prevention programmes, treatment, care and support."**

Although we still have **Miles to Go** as showcased in the latest UNAIDS report, this year, as we celebrate the 30th Anniversary of World AIDS day under the theme **"Know your status,"** the Infectious Diseases Institute (IDI) at Makerere University joins hands with the global community to raise awareness of the HIV epidemic, remembering loved ones we have lost to the pandemic and reflecting on the seemingly unimaginable gains made since these life-saving treatments emerged.

Formed in 2002 as a Ugandan not-for-profit organisation, the Institute is established within and wholly owned by Makerere University with the mission to strengthen health systems in Africa, with a strong emphasis on infectious diseases, through research and capacity development.

Since inception, the Institute has largely contributed to HIV programming through a myriad of HIV prevention initiatives needed to stop HIV transmission among different key affected populations, as well as the general public.

Today, there are many new ways of expanding access to HIV testing; including self-testing, community-based testing and multi-disease testing are all helping people to know their HIV status. The Institute's Outreach programme has reached over 300,000 clients using **differentiated service delivery models** to meet the diverse needs and expectations of people living with HIV (PLHIV) (both directly, and in partnership with the Government, research organizations and non-government health providers). This amounts to about 30% of the national effort. The Institute works in various regions of the country to include Kampala – Wakiso, the Mid-West, and the West Nile Region (where our beneficiaries include a significant number of refugees).

While, many barriers to HIV testing remain, the programmes we implement work towards achieving the goal of universal access as well as reducing unnecessary burdens on our health systems. The Institute is a national referral centre for complicated HIV cases – at the IDI clinic at Mulago where we support over 7,000 patients with high-quality treatment free of charge. Our extensive HIV prevention services also include elimination of HIV transmission from mother to child; tracing contacts of people living with HIV; and voluntary medical male circumcision.

Founded on a systems strengthening approach, the Institute houses a state-of-the-art laboratory certified with the College of American Pathologists in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University; and also manages a translational lab in partnership with University of California San Francisco and others.

Furthermore, the Institute's robust training programme has built the capacity of over 26,000 health workers from Uganda and 27 other African countries in advanced and specialized courses centered around management of HIV & related infectious diseases. Our trainings target health workers in resource limited settings and for over 10 years, the Institute has also provided a toll-free call in service **"The Advanced Treatment Information Centre"** (ATIC), which continues to give health staff advice relating to HIV/AIDS at the time they need it.

As we mark the 30th anniversary of World AIDS day, the Institute's Ugandan Academy for Health Innovation and Impact, in partnership with The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) and Uganda AIDS Commission (UAC), with support from the Embassy of Ireland have organized a participatory exhibition to showcase materials of the HIV response in Uganda, collected over the last 30 years.

The HIV exhibition which will take place at the Uganda Museum will be launched in a European Union-led high level meeting set to be held on 28th November 2018 and will be officiated by the Ambassador for Ireland in Uganda, William Carlos. This meeting will involve dignitaries from the different embassies and the Centres of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), thereafter, the exhibition will be open to the public free-of-charge from 1st (World AIDS Day) to 21st December, 2018.

The exhibition brings together research and lived experience, as well as a display of the many textures of HIV advocacy and outreach since the disease was first discovered in Uganda. Among its objectives, the exhibition aims to engender behavioral change in order to add to the achievement of the UNAIDS 90-90-90 goals. Testing and counselling services will also be offered throughout the exhibition.

Join us today as we mark the 30th anniversary of World AIDS Day by raising awareness about the importance of knowing one's status and removing all barriers to accessing HIV care.

