Community perspective on viral load monitoring in resource-limited settings

Michael Gwaba
Programmes Manager
(Community Initiative for TB, HIV/AIDS and Malaria (CITAM+), Zambia)
Outline

• Availability of VLT
• Importance of VLT
• Challenges in the provision of VLT in RLS from a Patient Perspective
• Challenges in the provision of VLT in RLS from my service provider
• Recommendations
Viral load testing status in Africa

• Routine VL testing is unavailable in most African countries

• Apart from South Africa, all African Countries reserve the Viral Load test for confirmation of treatment failure commonly after either immunologic or clinical failure
Importance of Viral Load Testing

• Guide for clinical decisions on when to switch to other line treatment regimen
• Useful tool to monitor the levels of drug resistance in HIV patients on treatment
• Useful tool for monitoring adherence to treatment
• Useful tool in performing sentinel surveillance
• Diagnosis of HIV infection in children aged <18 months.
Challenges – Provision of VLT in RLS- Patients

• High costs for the test when requested
• Distance to the health facility where VLT is available
• Lack of awareness on VLT among patients
• Response time in getting results of the VLT due to inadequate manpower
• Inadequate Infrastructure – Labs, No Electricity
Challenges – Provision of VLT in RLS – Service Provider

q **High costs**
• Cost of equipment and reagents and subsequent costs per test
• Cost of infrastructure setup

q **Infrastructure challenges**
• Space requirements sufficient to minimize contamination and ensure high quality of test process
• Unreliable power supply, air conditioning
• Equipment breakdown and lack/unreliable local capacity for troubleshooting and maintenance

q **Transport and cold chain logistics**
• Most systems require plasma type of specimen which should be separated within six hours of whole blood collection
• Lack/unreliable cold-chain system for plasma transportation and storage to centralized facilities

**Technical complexity**
• Current viral load platforms are too complex and require a medium to high level of expertise i.e. Trained Human Resource
Recommendations

• Rather than considering viral load data to be an unaffordable luxury, efforts should be made to ensure that viral load testing becomes affordable, simple, and easy to use in resource-limited settings. This can be done by advocating for increased invest in research and development of easy to use point of care viral load tests.
Recommendations

• Need to increase the number of VLT machines available in the country – (especially with increased threshold from 350 to 500)
• Need to create demand for VLT by raising awareness on the availability of the service and its importance
• Need to build more labs in rural communities that are solar powered where specimens can be safely stored prior to transportation to the provincial labs
• Need to train more staff who can conduct the VLT
• Improvements in our cold chain system
THANK YOU