

International rugby star Gareth Thomas and the Tackle HIV campaign to attend AIDS 2026 to combat stigma on a global stage

- *Campaign aims to change public attitudes to HIV and challenge stigma, using the power of sport to influence thinking and behaviour*
- *Panel session at IAS Global Village followed by community engagement events including rugby coaching sessions*
- *New survey reveals continued public misunderstanding around HIV*

Gareth Thomas CBE will attend the 26th International AIDS Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, showcasing the Tackle HIV campaign he spearheads. Tackle HIV, which is funded and supported by ViiV Healthcare, with support from a number of national and international advocacy groups as charity partners, aims to improve public awareness and understanding of HIV and break down the stigma around it. The campaign is supported by many people from across the sport and celebrity world including Sir Elton John, David Furnish and Prince Harry. Gareth Thomas played for Wales 100 times and captained the British & Irish Lions, and has since gone on to have a successful TV and media career. He was the first openly gay professional rugby player when he came out in 2009, and in 2019 announced he was HIV positive.

Now in its sixth year, central to many of the campaign's initiatives is the power of sport to reach communities and help bring changes in understanding and behaviour. Brazil has the highest prevalence of HIV in Latin America and AIDS 2026 in Rio provides a valuable opportunity to continue the work of the campaign.¹ Through a unique partnership with leading Brazilian HIV not-for-profit Barong Cultural Institute, Brazil Rugby Federation and Grassroot Soccer, Tackle HIV has the opportunity to take HIV education to wider audiences both at the congress and in the grassroots community of Rio de Janeiro, with support also from the Rio de Janeiro Municipal Health Department.

Barong Cultural Institute focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual health education, whilst adolescent health organisation Grassroot Soccer leverages the power of soccer to equip young people with life-saving information, services, and mentorship. The Global Village is a diverse and vibrant space where individuals, groups and organisations from all over the world gather, making it an ideal place to bring together this collaboration to engage with communities and challenge stigma together.

The Tackle HIV campaign's activities in Rio will be organised under the umbrella theme '*Changing public attitudes to HIV, and challenging stigma. The power of sport to influence thinking and behaviour.*'

Speaking in the run up to AIDS 2026, Gareth said: "*Since finding out I have HIV and starting the Tackle HIV campaign with ViiV Healthcare I have learnt so much about the virus and about how it affects people living with it. As our surveys clearly demonstrate, HIV is still misunderstood and because of that stigma still exists. Bringing the campaign to Brazil is a great opportunity for us to continue to educate about HIV and to use the power of sport to help change public attitudes.*"

Marta McBritton, president of Barong Cultural Institute said: "*Sport is one of the most powerful ways to bring people together, break down prejudice and create opportunities for conversations that might never happen in other settings. Science has made extraordinary progress over the past four decades, but prejudice has not kept pace. In many parts of the world, we are witnessing setbacks that threaten hard-won rights and reinforce HIV-related stigma. Sexuality is a natural part of life, and sexual and reproductive health is an essential part of overall health. By bringing together sport, science and community organisations, we can demonstrate that HIV is a shared social responsibility and that addressing it requires knowledge, dignity, solidarity and equitable access to healthcare.*"

Gui Pereira, CEO of Rio Rugby said: *“Having Gareth and the Tackle HIV campaign in Rio during the AIDS 2026 conference is a great opportunity for us to build on our ongoing community activations, to include some health and HIV education, and to promote rugby and its values with a global rugby superstar. Sport has a unique ability to connect with people of all ages and help bring about changes in thinking in behaviour, and our rugby community are looking forward to putting this into action around HIV.”*

Campaign activities in Brazil will include:

- A panel discussion on Monday 27 July at 14.00 local time, held on the main stage of the Global Village. Confirmed speakers: **Gareth Thomas**, Wales international rugby player, HIV advocate and campaigner. **Marta McBritton**, President of Instituto Cultural Barong, Brazilian advocacy organisation. **Raquel Kochhann**, Brazil international rugby player, health campaigner. **Boyd Mkandawire**, Managing Director, Grassroot Soccer Zambia. The Global Village is open to the public.
- Community engagement activity on Wednesday 29 July 18.00-20.00 local time, illustrating the power of sport to shape thinking and behaviour. In partnership with the Brazil Rugby Federation and Rio Rugby, Tackle HIV and Gareth Thomas will be hosting an interactive rugby skills and coaching session on Ipanema beach working with adolescents from disadvantaged communities and the adult rugby community. The Barong mobile educational van will also be located close by to help support the educational nature of the events and to offer HIV testing, joined by Rio de Janeiro Municipal Health Department STI/HIV Coordination

Stigma remains a significant barrier to progress in the HIV response, and to the UNAIDS goal of ending HIV and AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Science has enabled incredible advances in treating HIV, meaning people living with HIV who are on effective medication cannot pass HIV onto their sexual partner.² On treatment, people living with HIV have the same life expectancy as those without and can live long lives without limitation.³ Despite this, people living with HIV still face stigma and discrimination which undermine prevention, testing and treatment efforts.⁴ It is estimated that not tackling HIV stigma could result in 440,000 additional HIV related deaths between 2020 and 2030.⁵

New data from Tackle HIV's 2026 international survey assessing public understanding and attitudes to HIV revealed there is still significant misunderstanding about HIV globally, contributing to the continued stigma. In Brazil:⁶

- 36% of people surveyed didn't think heterosexual men could acquire HIV and 37% didn't think heterosexual women could. HIV can affect anyone and globally over half of people living with HIV are female
- Fewer than half of people surveyed (48%) had taken an HIV test before, however a further 40% would consider it. Those who wouldn't take an HIV test said they didn't think they were at risk
- Less than a third (29%) of people surveyed knew that people living with HIV who are on effective treatment cannot pass HIV onto sexual partners and 1 in 5 (19%) thought people living with HIV can't have a sexual relationship

Notes to Editors

Available for interview:

- **Gareth Thomas**, Wales international rugby player, HIV advocate and campaigner
- **Marta McBritton**, President of Instituto Cultural Barong, Brazilian advocacy organisation
- **Raquel Kochhann**, Brazil international rugby player, health campaigner
- **Boyd Mkandawire**, Managing Director, Grassroot Soccer Zambia

About HIV

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. 'Immunodeficiency' refers to the weakening of the immune system by the virus. If left untreated, infection with HIV progresses through a series of stages leading to late-stage HIV or AIDS.⁷ However HIV is now a manageable chronic disease.⁸ HIV medication works by reducing the amount of the virus in the blood so much so that it does not show up in standard blood tests. This means the levels of HIV are so low that the virus cannot be passed on. This is called having an undetectable viral load or being undetectable.⁹ More information about undetectable equals untransmittable, U=U, is available [here](#). HIV is passed on through blood, semen, vaginal fluid, anal mucus and breast milk, if the person with HIV has a detectable viral load. It is not passed on by spitting, sneezing, coughing, or general social contact.¹⁰

About ViiV Healthcare

ViiV Healthcare is a global specialist HIV company established in November 2009 with GSK (LSE: GSK) and Shionogi as current shareholders. The company is dedicated to delivering advances in treatment and care for people living with HIV and for people who could benefit from HIV prevention. ViiV Healthcare's aims are to take a deeper and broader interest in HIV and AIDS than any company has done before and take a new approach to deliver effective and innovative medicines for HIV treatment and prevention, as well as support communities affected by HIV.

For more information on the company, its management, portfolio, pipeline, and commitment, please visit viihealthcare.com.

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