

Evaluation of HIV Viral Load and Early Infant Diagnosis Point-of-Care Testing in the Copperbelt Province, Zambia

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The overall health outcomes of maternal and child health clients can drastically improve by providing access to point-of-care testing for children, infants, and pregnant and breastfeeding women in the Copperbelt Province, Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

HIV viral load (VL) and early infant diagnosis (EID) in Zambia's Copperbelt Province has assumed a centralized testing model over the past 16 years. With this centralized model, the turnaround time (TAT) ranges from 16-21 days (December 2022), which negatively impacts management of children (0-14 years), and pregnant and breastfeeding women (PBFW) on antiretroviral therapy (ART).

Point of care testing (POCT) improves access to important diagnostic tests for these defined target populations, reducing the use of centralized laboratories. The GeneXpert point-of-care analyser, which has traditionally been used for tuberculosis diagnosis is easy-to-use, making it ideal in resource-limited settings.

VL and EID sample testing have recently been activated on the GeneXpert platform to improve testing. EID of HIV-exposed infants and VL testing access for children and PBFW has been rolled out to selected health facilities with the intention of improving TAT and access.

METHODS

A survey involving comprehensive data collection process that included face-to-face and phone call interviews was used. A structured questionnaire was administered to laboratory staff and clinicians in the mother and child health (MCH) departments in 12 SAFE supported sites. A total of 24 participants were enrolled, two from each site, one from the laboratory and one from MCH department. A detailed review of responses provided valuable insights on clinical and laboratory appreciation of the service provided and timeliness of results.

RESULTS

- All twelve sites demonstrated 100% awareness of EID and VL testing on POCT analysers, with 66.7% receiving specialized training on EID and 91.6% on VL.
- A total of 85.4% of POCT sites had a thorough understanding of EID and VL testing in POCT facilities.
- From the 12 sites surveyed, 11 reported conducting an average of 25 VL tests and 27 EID tests per month, with a range of 5 to 100 tests.
- Prior to POCT implementation, average turnaround time was 20 days for both EID and VL.
- All POCT sites achieved less than 48 hours TAT from sample collection to dispatch of results after POCT implementation.

CONCLUSION

- The survey showed that the 12 sites have high awareness of EID and VL testing on POCT analysers.
- Most staff have specialized training and a thorough understanding of these tests.
- The sites conduct on average 25 VLs and 27 EIDs monthly with TATs ranging between 2-48 hours.
- This TAT highlights the effectiveness of POCT.
- POCT must be expanded to improve MCH and enhance overall health outcomes.

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