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MCC News

An e-newsletter about male circumcision for HIV prevention in Kenya

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Benson Oduor Ngesi, 36, is pleased after getting circumcised at Got Agulu Sub-District Hospital.

Photo courtesy of Betty Oyugi

Programme aims to raise average age of clients

Benson Oduor Ngesa, 36, was a happy man.

Minutes earlier, he had learnt the results of his HIV test from a counselor at Got Agulu Sub-District Hospital, and it was negative. "I am so proud," he said.

Ngesa had come to the hospital that day to get circumcised. At home, on leave from his job in Mombasa, he had heard on the radio that becoming circumcised could help protect him from HIV infection.

Male relatives and friends who had been circumcised told Ngesa that the service was free and was performed by well-qualified health professionals. They added that HIV counseling and testing was offered as part of male circumcision services at the hospital, and that was one of the reasons why he decided to go for the "cut."

Despite his joy at the negative result, Ngesa understood that he could still contract HIV infection in the future. The counselor had explained to him that male circumcision does not offer complete protection and that he would need to practice other measures, such as condom use, to retain his HIV-negative status.

Ngesa is a member of a key target audience for the government's voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) programme. VMMC services are offered to all men ages 18 and older and to boys younger than 18 with their parents' permission, but the principle aim is to reach sexually active, HIV-negative men ages 15 to 49.

Circumcising these men is critical to achieving a rapid reduction in new HIV infections, explains Dr. June Odoyo, coordinator of the Universities of Nairobi, Illinois and Manitoba (UNIM) Research and Training Centre. "We have to convince the sexually active ones to come, in order to have the greatest possible public health impact."

But demand for male circumcision appears to be highest in the younger age groups. During the Rapid Results campaign in November-December 2009, for example, 45 percent of clients were younger than 16. Many parents want their young sons circumcised because the procedure offers partial protection against HIV and some other sexually transmitted infections.

Why have men older than 18 been slower to embrace the practice? Those working in the programme offer a number of possible explanations. Some men in Luo Nyanza continue to regard male circumcision as an alien cultural practice rather than a medical intervention to prevent HIV. Many are married and think that they do not need to worry about HIV infection or fear that seeking the "cut" will be seen as an admission of infidelity. Others say they could not afford to miss work for a few days while the circumcision wound healed.

The Male Circumcision Consortium is conducting research to better understand the reasons why many men older than 18 do not seek male circumcision and to explore different ways of encouraging men in this age group to become circumcised, including giving coupons to satisfied clients who refer their peers.

The research results will inform efforts to mobilise men ages 18 to 49 to seek VMMC. The national VMMC programme plans to reach out to this age group in a number of ways, including a mobilisation campaign built around public video shows of the World Cup matches in June and efforts to encourage women to refer their male partners.

Knowledge of male circumcision high, survey finds

More women than men in Nyanza Province associate male circumcision with HIV prevention, although knowledge and awareness of the procedure are high among both men and women.

These are some of the findings from a recent survey, summarised in a *Report on Baseline Survey In Support of the Development of Male Circumcision Communication Strategy* from the National Aids and STD Control Programme (NASCOP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The survey was conducted by Infotrak Research and Consulting in February and March 2010 across eight districts in Nyanza Province. A total of 1,940 men (192 circumcised and 1,737 uncircumcised) and 290 women were interviewed.

When the 2,220 respondents were asked about what "male circumcision" meant, 38 percent of the women associated the procedure with HIV prevention, compared to 28 percent of the men. Ninety-four percent of both men and women identified male circumcision as the cutting of the foreskin.

Most respondents cited mass media as their primary source of information on male circumcision. Radio was by far the most common source of information, followed by television and word of mouth. The most common message that the respondents were able to recall from these sources was the benefits of male circumcision.

When asked which sources had influenced their decision, most circumcised men said that word of mouth and circumcised peers had persuaded them to go for the "cut." They also said that they perceived circumcision as a good health practice.

Although the study found high levels of knowledge about male circumcision, it also identified potential barriers to seeking the service.

About half the men said they had had fears about male circumcision. Most circumcised men said that they had had to overcome fears about the surgery being painful, and many mentioned concerns about excessive bleeding. The duration of healing was also an issue. Men are supposed to abstain from sexual activity for at least six weeks, to allow proper healing of the wound.

The survey suggests that a lack of awareness of the benefits of male circumcision, or simply lack of interest, may be the main reasons why men do not get circumcised. Most of the uncircumcised men reported that they had not thought about male circumcision seriously, and others had not heard about its benefits. Another common reason was that male circumcision is not a practice in the Luo

tradition.

Dr. Nicholas Muraguri, head of NASCOP, says that these findings will be used to guide the development of communication strategies for the voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) programme.

Since the government launched the programme in November 2008, more than 100,000 men have been circumcised in Nyanza, which was the first province to implement VMMC. The government aims to circumcise about 760,000 more men in the next four years as part of a national effort to reach 80 percent of the uncircumcised men in Kenya.

Male circumcision in the news

Genital Wart Virus May Raise Men's Risk of HIV

Resources

Traditional Male Circumcision among Young People: A Public Health Perspective in the Context of HIV Prevention

This synthesis of the available literature on the prevalence, techniques, and complications associated with traditional male circumcision includes recommendations for strengthening collaboration between the health sector and traditional circumcisers.

The Clearinghouse on Male Circumcision for HIV Prevention

Developed by the World Health Organization, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition, and Family Health International, this Web site is a comprehensive source of information and resources about male circumcision for HIV prevention.

The Male Circumcision Consortium (MCC) works with the Government of Kenya and other partners to prevent HIV and save lives by expanding access to safe and voluntary male circumcision services. Family Health International (FHI), EngenderHealth, and the University of Illinois at Chicago, working with the Nyanza Reproductive Health Society, are partners in the Consortium, which is funded by a grant to FHI from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Please send questions or comments to Silas Achar at: mccinfo@fhi.org; also, please indicate whether you want to continue receiving this e-newsletter regularly.