



Abiola Souliath, clinical psychologist at University Hospital of Cotonou in Benin

#EAWA

New Hope for the Future Surges When Frontline Trained Counselors Support Partners to Get Tested for HIV

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Photo: #EAWA

#EAWA PROJECT SUCCESS STORY

Abiola's story is one of many at #EAWA-supported health care sites in Benin.

A positive test for HIV can become a steppingstone to a better life, especially when partners and others are notified and agree to be tested as well. That is because current HIV treatment is so advanced that a long and healthy life is now possible for a people living with HIV (PLHIV).

This knowledge puts optimism in the steps of psychologist Abiola Souliath as she hurries to work every day at University Hospital of Cotonou (CNHU) in Benin, West Africa. She knows that some PLHIV experience emotional stress, but they need not suffer because people who know their status can now access highly effective antiretroviral therapy (ART).

Abiola, in her early 30s, is excited about her work because she is giving support to PLHIV to live safe and productive lives. Abiola's experience as a psychologist has convinced her of the benefits of index testing, which involves a person living with HIV — the index client — voluntarily listing sexual and drug-injecting partners and biological children and working with a trained counselor to identify the best way to refer these individuals for HIV

testing. When done properly, index testing can effectively identify HIV-positive clients at an early stage of infection, link them to treatment, and contribute to positive health outcomes and better well-being.

“Index testing is important because it helps us to improve people's knowledge of their HIV status in our community. I think it is vital for us to raise awareness of the benefits of index testing because clients may not have full confidence in the process. Index testing is a complex and delicate undertaking,” she said.

Index testing must be implemented through procedures that do no harm and uphold clients' rights to confidentiality, consent, and safety. Only trained providers can offer index testing services and their training must include screening clients for risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) from potential contacts and provision of first-line support for victims who disclose violence. In addition, a secure environment to store client information must be provided, and a site-level adverse event monitoring system must be in place.



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The Ending AIDS in West Africa (#EAWA) project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), provides regular training and coaching for providers to offer index testing. CNHU is a PEPFAR-supported site.

In 2021, during an #EAWA training course, Abiola improved her skills in index testing procedures. "A person can get tested without creating risk for partners, families, and children. If they want to share their status, they can do so," she says. "During the sessions, the facilitators made us practice through role-plays. This was very helpful; we all learned a lot."

Abiola's example underlines the success of #EAWA training because she is more motivated and excited about her work. Those who may wish to emulate can see the importance of good training, including emphasis on the precautions involved in index testing.

Abiola would like to see many more resources and more training to expand safe and ethical index testing strategies in her area. She cites the example of a woman and man who each tested positive before becoming a couple but did not disclose their diagnosis to each other. Later, both felt guilty for not disclosing their status earlier. Abiola gave them psychological support to strengthen their marriage and move forward.

The key to success lies in thorough training of everyone involved in index testing to work with the client to identify contacts and determine the best way to safely reach and motivate them to accept HIV testing. #EAWA regularly offers practical coaching discussions to help health providers minimize the potential risks associated with index testing.

After attending training, Abiola understands that index testing must be client centered, voluntary, confidential, nonjudgmental, and culturally and linguistically appropriate. She says strengthening providers' skills in motivational counseling and how to build trust and empathy with clients will also improve the quality and impact of index testing services. When index testing is offered as part of the HIV service package by skilled providers and with systems in place to protect the rights and safety of the client, it can be key to a country's progress toward epidemic control.

For more information about the #EAWA project, please email eawainfo@fhi360.org

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