

World AIDS Day, Know your Status!

The Fiji National University (FNU) supports the implementation of the National Strategic Action Plan (NSAP) on HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and STIs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) 2016-2020.

Twenty-nine years have elapsed since the first HIV case was reported in Fiji in 1989. Since then, in recognising HIV and AIDS as a development issue, the Government, through the collaboration of stakeholders and the coordination of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, has sustained a national response, in conformity with the changing profile of the epidemic.

This strategic plan has been updated and expanded to ensure that the response reaches beyond the health sector. To achieve the vision and the goal of the strategy, the NSAP on STIs, HIV & AIDS 2016-2020 comprises four priority areas of intervention; Prevention, Continuum of Care, System Strengthening and Monitoring, Evaluation and Research.

FNU also has a policy which provides guidelines to the University with regard to the institution's response to HIV & AIDS. The policy has specific reference to its ability to continue functioning thereby preventing HIV & AIDS from undermining its potential to operate and deliver mandated services.

Activities within the University include; the integration of HIV & AIDS education through the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences in its undergraduate and post graduate programmes and courses, and community outreach activities such as information sharing and voluntary screening tests.

I am an Assistant Professor in Obstetrics & Gynecology at FNU's School of Medical Sciences, and the World Aids Day (celebrated on December 1st every year) gives everyone an opportunity to reflect and to show solidarity in the fight against HIV.

It's also a chance for us all to show our support for people living with HIV and to commemorate people who have died. It is important for people to know their own status and also facilitate others to know theirs.

We can all start in our own little corners; at home, during sports, places of worship, in classrooms where we can insert HIV/STI (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) advocacy messages in our daily conversations. At a Professional level, as Health Care workers we should advocate for all our patients to know their status and also create a work environment safe enough for people living with HIV/AIDS.

This is the 30th Anniversary of World Aids Day and it should force us to reflect on what we can do better. We can help to decrease and to remove the stigma associated with getting your test done and knowing you have a positive result, empower those that know their status to protect themselves and their loved ones by using necessary precautions; and ensure our pregnant women access antenatal care as early as 2 months into their pregnancy and know their HIV Status.

These three acts don't need a high powered meeting. It's all of us appreciating that HIV is in our nation, in the Pacific and willing to be part of the solution. So, 'Know Your Status'!

This is also the core message from UNAIDS this year. For example, the Executive Director of UNAIDS Michel Sidibé, highlighted that

this year marked thirty years of activism and solidarity under the banner of World AIDS Day. On this World AIDS Day, UNAIDS was campaigning for people to know their HIV status and their viral load. In 2017, 9.4 million people were simply unaware that they are living with a potentially deadly, but treatable, disease.

If people don't know their HIV status, people who are living with HIV can't start treatment, and people who are HIV-negative can't get the knowledge and skills they need to keep that way. If people don't know their HIV status, they can't protect themselves, their families, their partners. If people living with HIV don't know their viral load, they won't be sure that the treatment is effective, protecting their health and stopping HIV transmission. Live life positively. Know your HIV status.

Meanwhile, the objectives of FNU's HIV & AIDS policy are: Prevention through information, education and training. This is achieved through the provision of education and information aimed to reducing the transmission of HIV, seeking to maintain a safe environment which empowers both men and women to resist coercive sex, to raising the level of understanding of HIV & AIDS throughout the University, to identifying and disseminating the available resources to be used in the fight against HIV & AIDS, to equipping students and staff to be able to live and work in societies with increasing rates of HIV infection and AIDS, and to providing HIV & AIDS counseling.

Additionally, to protect the rights of those affected by HIV & AIDS by creating an environment where people living with HIV & AIDS are safe to reveal their status and seek appropriate support and counseling. Lastly, to ensure care and support for workers by facilitating access to care and treatment where appropriate, and arranging referrals where appropriate, for those living with and affected by HIV & AIDS.

World Aids Day began in 1988 and there is a sense of celebration. We celebrate that we are better prepared to offer voluntary counseling and confidential testing. We celebrate that the antiretrovirals are still available free of charge and we have Hub Centers in the nation to follow-up those that are diagnosed. We celebrate that there is effective collaboration between the major stakeholders and there is ongoing research.

But let's not rest there. Know Your Status!



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