



Public Health Initiatives

VIRAL LOAD OPTIMIZATION IN OYO STATE THROUGH WEEKEND VIRAL LOAD BLEEDING

As a result of the ART Surge activities that commenced in Year 4 of the iCARES project, the following year saw Oyo State starting out the first quarter (October to December 2021) with the highest-ever number of clients eligible for Viral Load (VL) assessment.

Incidentally, the COVID-19 pandemic had necessitated the implementation of a six-month Multiple Month Drug (MMD6) refill drive in the state.

As a result, most of the clients eligible for VL sample assessment had picked up six months dosage of drugs and had no need to visit the health facility that quarter.



Some 63% (4,526) of the 7,219 clients eligible for VL assessment from October to December 2021 had appointments the outside period, making the achievement of 100% sample collection a huge challenge.

Even when tracked and contacted by the health facility staff, the clients were unwilling to come to the facility as they still had sufficient supplies of their medications and those who were willing to come found weekdays inconvenient.

As expected, this led to a very low number of VL samples being collected and concerns about the state team's ability to cover all the clients eligible for VL assessment in record time.

Case Study: Adeoyo Maternity Teaching Hospital

Adeoyo Maternity Teaching Hospital (AMTH), Ibadan, Oyo state is one of the facilities with the highest number of eligible clients for VL assessment every quarter. When weekend bleeding was proposed as an intervention to address the suboptimal sample collection rate of in the first quarter of Year 5 (October to December 2021), it was well accepted and seen as opportunity to reach more clients and improve the facility's performance in VL sample collection.

The VL champions worked very hard to track the clients and they provided support to the facility phlebotomists during the Saturday clinic. In addition, the ART nurses were on ground to facilitate access to the clinic, supervise, and provide additional services as may be required by clients. Despite having 987 clients without appointments or drug refills between April and June 2022 who are eligible for sample collection, the facility was able to achieve 98% (960) VL sample collection through the weekend bleeding innovation. This was a remarkable success when compared with sample collection rates of 83% to 90% in previous years without weekend bleeding.



The need, therefore, arose to come up with an innovative strategy to address this challenge and the state team came up with the Weekend VL sample collection.

The Weekend VL sample collection is an extended-hour sample collection carried out on Saturdays using a mix of facility and community-based approaches. It involved running a mini-clinic on Saturdays primarily to collect VL samples but also to provide a few other services. Community bleeding was provided for facilities in hard-to-reach communities while weekend bleeding was provided for facilities in the more easily-accessible locations.

The community-based approach involved facility staff taking the complement of ART services and VL sample collection to a designated venue such as the town hall or a central location which clients would be pre-informed of and clustered to receive services. Phlebotomists, ART Nurse-counsellors, VL champions, Data entry clerks, pharmacists and clinic support staff were involved in providing these services.

They were provided with transport fare and lunch as incentives for these extra services outside their regular work hours/days.

The clinic support staff helped to secure access to the clinic while other team members discharged their duties as expected.

At the time this strategy was to be implemented, it was foreseen that there would be some resistance, especially from the University College Hospital (UCH) which had the highest number of outstanding clients for VL assessment.

To forestall this challenge, the team proactively engaged the lead nurses, ART coordinators and facility administrators as needed.

The team also reviewed the existing sample collection performance and future projections while highlighting the necessity of the proposed intervention.

This helped to secure the buy-in and support of the leadership and the staff involved in VL sample collection in the facility, thus enabling free access to the clinic facilities and the smooth running of this novel intervention.

“In addition to helping us to aggressively track our patients, weekend bleeding has afforded our clients a convenient and attractive option for sample collection. Also, because the waiting time is short and they can easily pick up their drugs, they are always happy when they come and they tell us how much they appreciate our efforts. Weekend bleeding has also helped us to bleed more clients and improve our suppression rate.”

- **Mrs Olayinka Odojin**
VL Champion, Adeoyo Maternity