

Case study 10: Incorporating VMMC into traditional circumcision contexts in Mberengwa, Zimbabwe

Setting

A traditionally circumcising VaRemba tribe in Mberengwa District of Masvingo Province in southern Zimbabwe. VaRemba are among the few ethnic groups that practice traditional male circumcision (MC) in Zimbabwe, with initiation camps to complete the rites of passage from boyhood to manhood held annually or bi-annually (2016–2019).

Challenges

- Traditional circumcisers typically perform MCs with the help of community elders. Adverse events (AEs) are not uncommon due to lack of proper hygiene for both the procedure and the camp environment. There is no documentation of MCs performed, nor identification, treatment or verification of associated AEs.
- No clear protocols exist for guiding acquisition and disbursement of funds, food and transport, proper consent process, counselling procedure and follow-up, especially in young males. The VaRemba are also fragmented into smaller groups with separate leadership.

Barriers

There is restriction of VaRemba camp attendance to only members of the VaRemba tribe.

Initiatives taken

- 1) A partnership was formed between the VaRemba community and ZAZIC, a consortium led by the University of Washington's International Training and Education Center for Health (I-TECH) and comprised of local implementing partners including the Zimbabwe Association of Church-related Hospitals (ZACH) and the Zimbabwe Community Health Intervention Research Project (ZiCHIRe), supported by PEPFAR and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The partnership aimed to provide safe, standardized MCs and reduce AEs during traditional initiation rites, in collaboration with Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC).
- 2) The partnership promoted cultural competency and sensitivity, with a long-term goal of VMMC scale-up in the area.
- 3) After years of sensitization, communication and relationship-building, the VaRemba Camp Collaboration (VCC) was formed and supported the traditional VaRemba MC camp.
- 4) Through the VCC, the District supplied the VaRemba with medical MC kits to augment the safety of traditional MCs conducted by VaRemba circumcisers.

- 5) In 2016 two male VaRemba nurses were trained in VMMC and in the use of documentation tools for VMMC. ZAZIC also worked closely with a trained team of circumcised VaRemba men to encourage uptake of medical MCs.
- 6) In 2017, following a meeting held with 14 VaRemba community leaders, the District Administrator, the National AIDS Council, ZAZIC, the Mberengwa District Health officials and the Provincial Medical Director, and the National Male Circumcision Coordinator, the VaRemba formally adopted national VMMC guidelines for their initiation including consent, counselling and HIV testing. ZAZIC supported mobilization of both VaRemba and non-VaRemba males in the area.
- 7) The camp ran from 1 August to 6 September, 2017, with VMMC offered to males above 10 years of age according to MoHCC policy. Those under 10 years of age underwent traditional circumcision.¹

Results

- Of the 725 MCs conducted during the camp, 657 (91%) received medical MC.
- Due to the support of VaRemba leaders and approval of the medical MC performed by the VaRemba nurses, almost all those eligible opted for modern MC.
- Since VaRemba nurses were resident in the camp, all MCs were reviewed on days 2 and 7, including those circumcised traditionally.
- Only 3 moderate infections occurred in medical MC cases, and all were promptly treated with antibiotics and healed well.

Lessons learnt

- 1) The VCC is one of the few of its kind in Zimbabwe to successfully pair traditional circumcision practices with modern MC.
- 2) The ZAZIC/VaRemba collaboration resulted from four years of consistent consultation and collaboration between ZAZIC, MoHCC and VaRemba traditional leaders, demonstrating an earnest desire from all partners to invest in the success of the VCC.
- 3) This partnership model, based on respect for traditional circumcisers and cultural practices, may be replicable in other Zimbabwean contexts and other countries. In 2018 ZAZIC worked with six VaRemba communities in other geographic areas in Zimbabwe, culminating in one additional successful camp collaboration in Gokwe South District, where 206 VMMCs were performed without complications.

¹ Please note that WHO guidelines recommend VMMC for males 15 and above and for those with physical and cognitive maturity.