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MCC News

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

In this issue:

**Council Elder Advocates
Male Circumcision**

**Journalists Feted for Male
Circumcision Reporting**

**Male Circumcision in the
News**

Resources



Barack Otieno Tunya of the Luo Council of Elders spoke at a briefing in Nairobi about the benefits of voluntary medical male circumcision and his own decision to get circumcised.

Photo by Silas Achar/FHI 360

Council elder advocates male circumcision

Four years ago, Barak Otieno Tunya heard that the government planned to encourage men from his community to get circumcised.

He and his fellow members of the Luo Council of Elders were disturbed. They believed that their culture was being attacked, because the Luo do not traditionally circumcise their men.

“We felt that the government wanted to make a law for all men to get circumcised,” he said, “and being the custodians of culture, we could not allow this to happen.”

But in a series of sensitisation meetings with the government and its development partners, the elders learnt that male circumcision significantly reduces the risk of HIV infection in men and has other health benefits.

They also learnt that the national voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) programme was starting in Nyanza because the province has the country's highest HIV prevalence and lowest level of male circumcision. The services would be voluntary and would be performed safely by trained health care providers.

“We looked at the results and realised that we had to tell our people about male circumcision,” Tunya told journalists during a media briefing last month in Nairobi, where he was among a panel of five elderly men who had been circumcised under the VMMC programme.

Male circumcision advocate

As the secretary of the elders for Ugunja District in Siaya County, Tunya decided to use his influence to mobilise the men in his community for male circumcision.

But there was a problem. He was not circumcised. Tunya soon realized some men did not take him seriously when he spoke about male circumcision for HIV prevention. They wondered why he was telling them to get circumcised when he was not circumcised himself.

“The information I had at that time was that VMMC targeted a certain age group, and I was outside the age group,” he said. “But when I realized that even men my age could benefit, I decided to lead by example.”

Today, Tunya is a leading advocate of male circumcision in his community. He attributes his success in mobilising men to his being circumcised. “I challenge younger men to get circumcised when I tell them that I was circumcised at 61 years,” he said.

Circumcision and culture

The question of culture still arises from various community members, and Tunya argues that VMMC should be viewed as a health intervention and not a tradition or cultural practice.

Charles Messo Omollo, 71, agrees. “Culture is dynamic, and people have to adopt new solutions to life's challenges,” he said at the briefing.

One example, Omollo explained, is the now defunct Luo tradition of removing six lower teeth, which arose out of a need to feed individuals who had lockjaw

disease. Likewise, he said, male circumcision is a human invention, and now that research has proven its benefits, it is only wise to embrace it.

Older men and VMMC

While Kenya's programme is a world leader in VMMC, uptake of the services among men older than 25 years remains relatively low. HIV prevalence in Kenya peaks after age 24.

The national VMMC programme aims to reach 80 percent of men ages 15 to 49 — a total of 860,000 men. Since the programme began in 2008, more than 420,000 men and boys have been circumcised.

Dr. Athanasius Ochieng', VMMC programme manager for the National AIDS and STI Control Programme (NASCOP), says Kenya's programme is scaling up efforts to reach older men. "It's about having a more immediate impact in reducing HIV infections," he adds.

He challenges young men to emulate the examples of older men like Tunya, who notes that people are different, but all face some risks.

"There are those who stop having sex at 50 or even 80," Tunya said. "But even if you have sex once in a year, that one time alone can make a difference in your life. You need to take precaution."

Journalists feted for male circumcision reporting

Journalists reporting on male circumcision for HIV prevention were recognized and those who wrote the best three stories received awards during this year's StoryFest competition.

Marie Yambo, a reporter for KBC, emerged as the winner of the golden trophy in the VMMC category for her story about a discordant couple. Saida Swaleh of KTN and NTV's Ouko Okusah were first and second runners-up at the 24 August event held in Nakuru.

The StoryFest is an annual event sponsored by Internews Kenya that celebrates outstanding storytelling by health journalists from various media houses. Journalists are asked to submit their best print, TV and radio stories about health topics.

This year the Kenya National Task Force on Male Circumcision partnered with Internews to introduce a VMMC award category to recognize journalists' contributions to informing the public about male circumcision since the

government introduced the service as part of its HIV prevention strategy in 2008.

Joseph Warungu, the chief judge of the competition, described the entries for the VMMC categories as strong and covering a variety of interesting topics. “We saw evidence of good quality journalism, with well sourced and informative stories,” he said.

He explained that the judges scored the stories based on their creativity, relevance and possible impact on society. In addition to meeting the basic standards of journalism, the stories needed to have a human face, be compelling, sensitive and clear.

Noting that many of the submissions on VMMC were straightforward news stories, Warungu challenged the journalists to write more in-depth articles and features for subsequent competitions.

Dr. Peter Cherutich, head of HIV prevention at NASCOP, was the chief guest. He congratulated all the winners and challenged journalists to think big so that they can write gripping stories, and even books.

For more information visit Internews Kenya at:

<http://www.internewskenya.org/article.php?id=242>

Male circumcision in the news

HIV stakeholders offer “male cut” services on streets

Coastweek, 24-30 August

American pediatrics group cites benefits of male circumcision

VOA, 29 August

Drop in US circumcisions could inflate health costs – study

Reuters, 20 August 2012

Resources

Male circumcision programmes in Kenya: Lessons from the Kenya AIDS Indicator Survey 2007

This article, published in the 1 September issue of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, reports on an in-depth analysis of male circumcision data from the Kenya AIDS Indicator Survey of 2007. The analysis found that the national prevalence of HIV infection among uncircumcised men was 13.2 percent, compared to 3.9 percent among circumcised men.

Criticisms of African trials fail to withstand scrutiny: male circumcision does prevent HIV infection (abstract)

This abstract summarises an article published in the Australian *Journal of Law and Medicine* that provides a comprehensive overview of the scientific evidence that male circumcision reduces men's risk of acquiring HIV through vaginal sex by about 60 percent. The authors also evaluate claims made in an article published in *JLM* in December 2011, demonstrating how its authors used flawed statistical analyses, outmoded evidence, selective reporting of studies, data from non-peer-reviewed sources and misleading statements to question the effectiveness of male circumcision for HIV prevention

The **Male Circumcision Consortium (MCC)** works with the Government of Kenya and other partners—including the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which supports service delivery—to prevent HIV and save lives by expanding access to safe and voluntary male circumcision services. FHI 360 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@fhi360.org; also, please indicate whether you want to continue receiving this e-newsletter regularly.