

Reduction in risky adolescent sexual behaviour associated with increased health education in Cameroon, West Africa

Authors: Rene Kwalar; Emmanuel Nshom; George Ndosak; Pius Tih; Joseph Nkfusai; Lior Miller; Gideon Forgwei; Joce Kangong; Thomas Welty

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Background: Cameroon is the country hardest hit by HIV in the West and Central Africa Region. In 2004, HIV prevalence was 5.5% in the general population aged 15-49. HIV prevalence in young women aged 15-24 was 4.8%, significantly more than 1.4% in men of the same age group. In 2003, the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board (CBCHB) started Youth Network for Health (YONEFOH) in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon, to promote healthy behaviours to reduce the transmission of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Methods: As part of the first stage in the YONEFOH program design, CBCHB developed a survey questionnaire which included questions on demography, occupation, HIV status, prevention methods and sexual history. CBCHB surveyed 4,389 unmarried youth ages 12-26 years in 2004 and 4,858 in 2007 in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon using an anonymous self-administered questionnaire. The surveys were independent convenience samples of youth in 58 schools and 85 churches. STI-focused health education provided by CBCHB was strengthened in youth clubs, schools and churches between 2004- 2007. Training for trainers (students, teachers, and church leaders) was conducted and youth began holding monthly meetings on health education with quarterly CBCHB supervision. CBCHB analyzed how sexual behaviour changed in this three year interval among youth in these two regions.

Results: Respondents were 56% female and 44% male in both surveys. Age-adjusted, statistically significant behavioural changes occurred from 2004- 2007, as follows:

- Preference for abstinence to prevent STIs increased from 67% to 73%;
- Preference for condom use increased from 8% to 11%;
- Youths surveyed who were not sexually active at time of survey administration grew from 34% in 2004 to 52% in 2007;
- The number of youths who had had sexual relations less than one month ago decreased from 34% in 2004 to 21% in 2007;
- Those who had had sex with one partner at time of survey increased from 35% to 46%;
- The proportion of sexually active youths who have ever used condom increased from 45% to 58%
- The number of youths who reported being tested for HIV increased from 10% to 27%;
- Self-reported HIV prevalence decreased from 6% in 2004 to 4% in 2007 among those tested; and
- 14% of youth reported sexual debut at age ten or less in both surveys.

Conclusions: The overall trend reveals a reduction in risky sexual behaviour among youth of the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, which may be associated with increased sexual health education. YONEFOH has expanded to three of ten regions in Cameroon, enrolling over 7,000 youth in health clubs that promote abstinence until marriage, and offering voluntary HIV counselling and testing and contact tracing and partner notification services. YONEFOH reached 55,000 youth with sexual education in 2010. It is necessary to investigate the reasons for the high rate of early sexual debut and to expand education to younger children. More follow-up surveys are essential to further monitor program impact.