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A RAPID SCALE UP OF THE BLOOD TRANSFUSION PROGRAMME IN ZAMBIA

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Background: Zambia is among the countries most affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, a major challenge to the blood safety programme. Blood transfusion has been acknowledged as one of the most effective strategies in the prevention of the spread of HIV in Zambia. Due to limited resources, the country's blood safety programme is largely dependant on financial support from the international community. Since October 2004, Zambia has been implementing the Rapid Strengthening of Blood Transfusion Services Project, a five year project supported by the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). This abstract presents highlights of this project, which has led to a significant rapid scale up of blood transfusion services in Zambia.

Aim: To rapidly scale up the blood safety programme and ensure nationwide, equitable and affordable access to safe blood and blood products.

Methods: Methods used to support this comprehensive blood safety project include:

- Recruitment and retention of regular, voluntary non-remunerated blood donors from low-risk groups;
- Mandatory screening of blood for HIV, Hepatitis and Syphilis;
- Promotion of appropriate clinical use of blood and blood products;
- Continuous improvements in the organization, coordination and management of blood transfusion services.

Results: The key results for first 20 months of the project included:

- Increase in blood collections, from the baseline of 44,000 units per year to 89,000 units, representing over 100% of the target of 88,500 units;
- Increase in the proportion of voluntary blood donors, from 72% to 90%;
- 100% of blood collected was tested for HIV in accordance with national and WHO standards;
- Identification and establishment of a pool of 60,000 low risk sero-negative donors, who will be the main focus of donor motivation and retention in 2006;
- Only 35% of the donors were regular donors, resulting into high dependency on first time donors;
- HIV discards increased, from 6% to 9% and total discards from 15% to 19%, representing a major challenge for 2006;
- Improved coordination, supervision, reporting, monitoring and evaluation, through a decentralized model relying on provincial leadership.

Conclusions: A nationally coordinated safe blood program, with appropriate financial and technical support resulted into rapid scale up of blood transfusion services, in particular blood collections and the proportion of voluntary blood donors. Reliance on first time donors, though volunteers, may not enhance blood safety. Our strategy to further enhance blood safety will be focused at targeting the 60,000 sero-negative donors identified in Year 1 and converting them into regular repeating voluntary donors.