

THE EXPERIENCE OF CLINICAL MENTORING IN A NEW HIV HEALTH CARE SERVICE IN THU DUC, VIETNAM.

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Lack of practical clinical expertise has been identified as a barrier to scale-up of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services in developing countries. The International Center for Equal Healthcare Access (ICEHA) offers clinical mentoring programs that link clinical HIV expertise from developed countries, through 6-12 week volunteer mentoring placement, with the need for expertise in resource limited settings. Clinical mentors build practical expertise among local health professionals by direct transfer of skills to their colleagues.

In January and February 2006, Dr Nick Medland from Melbourne was posted at the Thu Duc Outpatient Clinic (TD OPC), a new project of Family Health International and the Ho Chi Minh City AIDS Committee. It is the only free HIV service in a district of more than 350,000 people with one of the highest HIV prevalences in Vietnam.

TD OPC is a community-level service, occupying a single building in a suburban street. Staffed with dedicated nursing, medical, counselling and support staff, mostly new to HIV, it provides voluntary counselling and testing VCT, home-based care and medical care, and psycho-social support in a client-focussed manner.

The new clinic had a high and increasing patient load, with advanced HIV infection, significant medical and psychosocial challenges and high rates of tuberculosis co-infection. Mentoring covered clinical pathways, clinical and laboratory assessment, appropriate use of available pharmaceuticals, prophylaxis and treatment of opportunistic infections and use of clinical guidelines.

A dramatic increase in the confidence and effectiveness of interventions was observed. Extrapulmonary tuberculosis and the availability of antiretrovirals were the greatest outstanding challenges.

Physician clinical mentors have an immediate impact on the provision of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention services in resource poor settings. A series of physician clinical mentors catalyze lasting changes in health systems.