



Assessing knowledge and attitudes about HIV/AIDS among rural health educators in Zambia

With approximately 35 different ethnic groups or tribes living within its borders, all with their own languages and traditions, Zambia is among the many culturally diverse nations in Africa. It is also among the many African nations where the spread of HIV/AIDS has risen catastrophically over the past decade. Zambia's rural regions are especially vulnerable to the epidemic, with over 20 percent of the rural population being HIV positive.

Local health educators in Zambia play a key role in curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS by bringing health education to the rural areas where health infrastructure is particularly poor. Recognizing rural health workers' integral role in educating local communities about HIV/AIDS, Dylan Barnes-Lotfi, MSN & MPH '04, traveled to Zambia in the summer of 2002 to assess knowledge and attitudes about HIV/AIDS among rural health educators.

Dylan's research supports the efforts of the William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation, a non-profit organization that promotes health, literacy and education in Zambia. "The responsibility for educating families and communities about the spread of HIV, and the care for those with AIDS has fallen on rural health workers in Zambia," said Dylan. "The William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation provides these health workers with the knowledge and skills they will need to battle the AIDS epidemic."

Working with her YSN faculty mentor, Professor Ann Williams, Dylan designed a survey to be distributed at five different training courses attended by 5-20 local participants in Zambia's Central, Southern, Eastern and Northwestern provinces. With the help of the Masetlha Foundation, the survey was translated into three local languages, pilot-tested, and reviewed for cultural appropriateness and language facility. A total of 79 community health

workers and other family health educators participated in Dylan's project, and data is currently being analyzed to determine frequencies and comparisons of knowledge and attitudes by gender, education level, socio-economic status and geographical region.

According to Dylan, initial analysis of the data suggests a high level of knowledge about HIV transmission among rural health workers, but also reveals a stigma towards those infected with AIDS. "HIV/AIDS still carries a stigma," said Dylan. "As the AIDS epidemic continues to spread, health educators in Zambia will be instrumental in helping local communities reassess their attitudes toward people with AIDS." Once data analysis is complete, Dylan's findings will help the William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation identify how to best support the education and clinical work of rural health workers in Zambia, and to help improve the lives of people living with AIDS.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

