AIDS control best practices at the National University of Rwanda

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SUMMARY

Objective Illustrate the experience and partnerships of the University League for AIDS Control at the National University of Rwanda.
Background For its mission of AIDS control and research, the University League for AIDS Control has multisectoral human resources.
Subjects and methods We make a descriptive study of AIDS Control activities within the university community.
Activities carried out: Voluntary Counseling and Testing for university students and personnel.
Training: Annual seminar on reproductive health and STIs, HIV and AIDS for first year students; Academic course on AIDS in all its aspects; Seminars for training of trainers on HIV and AIDS and reproductive health for students’ associations and university personnel. Communication for Behaviour Change: Editing a journal on reproductive health and STIs, HIV and AIDS; Sensitization cultural events and posters in the campus; Organizing a regional inter-university arts festival; Sensitization of high school students in holidays; Debates on radios. Research: Material support and documentation for final year dissertations. Condoms distribution on the campus. Capacity building: Training of lecturers, VCT personnel and secretariat staff. Financial and material support for income generating activities of the university association of PLWHAs.
Lessons learned There was better mobilization of students by cultural means than by lectures.


Introduction

Since a decade, AIDS control has been focused on by Rwandan public and private institutions [1]. The University League for AIDS Control was established on 27th November 1999, and is entrusted with the mission to fight against HIV and AIDS in the university community and in the general population and to coordinate research on HIV and AIDS at the National University of Rwanda. The objectives of the league are to coordinate activities, mobilize the university community, induce a behaviour change and coordinate research on HIV and AIDS. As a university institutional organ, the league has a board of directors, chaired by the rector, comprising delegates of professors, staff and students’ associations, and other stakeholders. It has an executive committee with a president, a vice-president, an executive secretary and a treasurer. It also has specialized commissions for behaviour change, youth and gender, and research. The league has a permanent secretariat and a VCT centre.

The league has comparative advantages: there are about 10000 students with many students’ associations, multisectoral human resources in the different faculties with the opportunity of multidisciplinary research, regional cooperation, and ICT facilities. There is support by the University, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and the National Commission for AIDS Control.

The National University of Rwanda has been a pioneer in AIDS Control among Rwandan higher education
institutions. AIDS education in African higher education institutions is necessary to increase students’ awareness and induce good attitudes and safe behaviour [2]. Prevention remains the most important axis of AIDS control. Recent literature indicates moderate to high level of knowledge in adolescents [3,4], empathy, tolerance, but also negative attitudes towards PLWHAs and unsafe practices. The level of perception of HIV and AIDS risk is correlated with safe or unsafe sex, but misconceptions can interfere [5].

The activities have been funded by the National University of Rwanda and the National AIDS Control Commission in partnership with UNICEF, UNDP, Action Aid – SIPAA, and MAP project and, since 2006, the partnership with the Women’s Health Research Unit of the Institute of Population Health, University of Ottawa, the Somerset West Community Health Centre, Ottawa, Canada, and the Canadian Society for International Health. Academic medical partnership has proven to be one of the most efficient AIDS control strategies [6].

Subjects and methods

We report activities carried out by the University League for AIDS Control in the university community, students and staff, in the surrounding high schools and among high school students in holidays. We make a descriptive study of these activities, based on exploration of documents and reports.

Activities

Behaviour change activities

Since 2000, at the beginning of the academic year, the league organizes for the first year newcomers a one week training course on Reproductive Health and STIs, HIV and AIDS. There are lectures and debates on HIV epidemiology, the socio-economic impact of HIV and AIDS, HIV modes of transmission, prevention methods, the youth and the role of students’ associations in fighting HIV and AIDS, sexuality, contraception, sexual violence, the impact of STIs, HIV and AIDS on reproduction. Out of approximately 1500 new students each year, a progressively increasing percentage participated to this training course: from about 30% in 2000 to about 50% in 2004 and practically 100% in 2007. Participation of students is enthusiastic and they put many questions on HIV and AIDS and reproductive health. First year students also have a 60 hours academic structured course, in which they learn all aspects of HIV and AIDS, with official assessment. This course is an initiative of the Association of African Universities.

Training of trainers workshops

The league organizes annual training workshops in reproductive health, STIs, HIV and AIDS for delegates of students’ associations and staff members. There are also workshops on proposal writing and implementation of action plans and micro-projects. Psycho-social management of PLWHAs is also learnt. Each year there are about three such workshops, with a number of participants between fifty and one hundred fifty. The students and the administrative and technical staff members show great interest for these seminars; the limiting factor is the maximal number that can participate to a training session.

Communication for behaviour change

The league edits the quarterly journal “Echo de la LUCS” on reproductive health and STIs, HIV and AIDS. Students, professors, staff members and people outside the university express their views and opinions and report some facts in different articles. The reflections usually expressed in the essays deal with behaviour change, but the journal has not attracted a great number of readers. Probably short articles would be more efficient, as they are easy to read. There are also sensitization cultural events aiming at inducing awareness among students and staff members. This is done in collaboration with the university women students’ association, the scouts, the drama groups, poets, painters, the reproductive health club, the medical students’ association, the pan African movement, the youth clubs, the youth and gender commission of the general association of students of the National University of Rwanda. An emphasis is made on sensitizing new students. Multimedia campaigns, with posters, films, cultural events are organized. The high school students are also supervised within their anti-AIDS clubs, particularly by the medical students’ association, through visits and training workshops. During holidays, high school students in districts of the Southern Province are sensitized by the league, in collaboration with the university students’ music group. Sensitization is also ensured through HIV and AIDS awareness posters in the campus.

Since 2004, the league organizes an annual regional
inter-university arts festival for students from higher education institutions of Rwanda and neighboring countries on the theme of AIDS control. Attendance is huge and participation is enthusiastic. Regular debates on the district people’s radio and a weekly programme on Radio Salus, the radio of the National University of Rwanda, are educative not only for university students, but also for the whole population.

Public lectures have proven not to be very attractive for students. On the contrary, forum-theatre, in which the public is given the opportunity to intervene, comment and propose a solution to a given situation are most attractive and educative for university students. Intra-faculty sensitization workshops have also been used, but to be effective they need a regular follow-up.

**Voluntary Counseling and Testing** for university students and personnel has been ensured by the VCT centre of the league. The centre is well equipped and has trained personnel. The new facilities permit the necessary discretion. There is a pre- and post-test counseling. When awareness days are organized, there are many students and staff members who come to the centre for voluntary testing. But along the year, the consultation rate is rather low. The females represent ¼ of the consulting students, what is approximately similar to their proportion in the university student population. However, positive results are higher in females than in males.

The league has helped the establishment of an association of PLWHAs among staff members and students. The league gives financial and material support for income generating activities of this association.

The league has made condoms available, free of charge and self-service in students’ homes and at different office places in the university campus.

**Research**

The league supplies material support to final year students writing dissertations on HIV and AIDS. Many studies on knowledge, attitudes and practices concerning HIV and AIDS and reproductive health have been carried out in different faculties. A seroprevalence study was conducted in 2001, and showed an HIV seroprevalence of 2.2% in the students’ community; afterwards, observations in the voluntary counseling and testing centre showed similar seroprevalence rates along years.

From 2002 to 2004, unplanned pregnancies within the university community were also studied. Behaviour components and risk factors were analyzed. It appears that such studies carried out by the university women students association and by the league have been useful, as the incidence of unplanned pregnancies decreased steadily the last four years.

**Projects**

We have a project to give prizes to best dissertations on HIV and AIDS. Another project is the reinforcement of the HIV and AIDS documentation centre. The challenge for the different faculties is to carry out multidisciplinary research.

Capacity building The University has ensured the training of VCT personnel in counseling, the training of the secretariat staff and the chairpersons of commissions, and a 12 week training course in South Africa for 5 assistant lecturers from different faculties in charge of the course on HIV and AIDS in all its aspects for first year students.

**Regional workshop**

On the initiative and with the support of the Association of African Universities, the University League for AIDS Control organized, in December 2006, a Central African Workshop of Francophone Universities for the integration of HIV and AIDS programmes in Higher Education Institutions. From this workshop, an interuniversity AIDS Control network was established, chaired by the president of the University League for AIDS Control.

**Gender and HIV and AIDS**

A training workshop on gender and HIV and AIDS has been organized for university students’ associations thanks to the partnership with the Women’s Health Research Unit of the Institute of Population Health, University of Ottawa, the Somerset West Community Health Centre, Ottawa, Canada. Training materials have also been supplied, notably a training module on HIV and gender. This partnership also supported a workshop on strategic planning for university students’ associations. Experience was exchanged for African and Caribbean populations in Ottawa. A National University of Rwanda staff member visited the University of Ottawa and shared his experience with them on the use of arts and drama, particularly forum-theatre for behaviour change communication.

With the support of the partnership with Global Ottawa AIDS Link, the president and the permanent secretary of the University League for AIDS Control attended the XVIth International AIDS Conference in Toronto.
They also visited and shared views with the partners at the University of Ottawa and the Somerset West Community Health Centre.

Discussion

There was a strong demand and high consumption of condoms in students’ homes. This indicates that the need for condoms was real. Behaviour change was difficult in students; there are some cultural handicaps that enhance resistance to change. Gender and cultural influences on attitudes towards AIDS prevention have been observed in other contexts [2,7]. An underestimation of the HIV and AIDS risk may also lead to unsafe sex [8]. Seeking voluntary counseling and testing is still at low level among students. This has also been observed in other universities [9]. Students show great motivation to learn about HIV and AIDS. A great interest for HIV and AIDS prevention course has also been observed in other studies, even though social norms may interfere [10].

Conclusion and lessons learned

There is better mobilization of students by cultural means than by lectures. The artistic approach is better for communication for behaviour change. The students as well as the members of personnel are enthusiastic for training seminars. There is a need for the reinforcement of specialized commissions and students’ associations. The partnership with the Institute for Research on Population Health was a good experience concerning gender and HIV and AIDS.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to all stakeholders, particularly to the partnership of the University League for AIDS Control with the Women’s Health Research Unit of the Institute of Population Health, University of Ottawa, the Somerset West Community Health Centre, Ottawa, Canada, and the Canadian Society for International Health.

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