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## **HIV, pregnancy and parenthood in PNG**

HIV-positive mothers and their husbands are key agents in determining the future of maternal and child health and the prevention of parent to child transmission (PPTCT) of HIV in PNG, a recent report has found.

Carried out by researchers at the PNG Institute of Medical Research (IMR) in collaboration with colleagues at the University of New South Wales in Australia, the report from the IMR, *HIV, pregnancy and parenthood* is a qualitative study of the prevention and treatment of HIV in pregnant women, parents and their infants in PNG.

Funded by AusAID's Development Research Award Scheme, the study sought to understand the experiences of women and men engaging in prevention of parent to child transmission of HIV programs in two high HIV burden provinces: the National Capital District and Western Highlands.

"The study looked into a number of important areas in the prevention and treatment of HIV for parents and infants," said Dr Angela Kelly, Head of Social and Behavioral Research, IMR. This included 'HIV testing and care during pregnancy, 'positive living', HIV treatment for parents and their babies, early infant diagnosis and men's involvement'

"One of the interesting findings was the number of women and their husbands who already knew that they had HIV and who, wanting a family, were able to do so because of increased access to HIV treatment and care at PPTCT clinics throughout the country," said Dr Kelly.

"Some parents had lost a baby to AIDS previously while other wanted a child for the first time. They all wanted the joy of holding a baby "free from HIV", she said.

"In response to the key findings, a number of important recommendations were made with the stakeholder community. One of which was the importance of ensuring health care workers involved in PPTCT were giving mothers the most up-to-date infant feeding advice."

"In 2009 revised National guidelines on infant feeding were released which recommend exclusive breastfeeding of all infants for the first six months of life, along with the continuation of breastfeeding, together with other foods and fluids after 6 months," she said.

"More than two years after the revised policy was released, the updated information was not fully disseminated. Many health care workers reported that they told women to abruptly cease breastfeeding and not mix feed after 6 months."

Dr Kelly went on to say that HIV testing in the ANC is a critical first step in a long process to prevent babies being infected with HIV. Increased human resources are needed to ensure women are given greater support during the testing and counseling process.

The study also found that early infant diagnosis was an area where improvements were urgently needed.

Some parents, she said, reported giving up getting their child's test results after many failed attempts.

A total of 113 women, men and health care workers participated in this study, which was conducted between January and December 2011 in nine clinics in the two study provinces.

This study provides critical information required to improve maternal and child health and to treat and prevent HIV in PNG.

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