



UN Cares in Action

The Case of the Republic of South Africa 2013

Wellness Approach

Editor: Samantha Kozikott

Contributor: Dan Maina

The UN Cares team in South Africa has dedicated efforts towards the adoption of broader health and wellness approaches to address the HIV and AIDS-related challenges faced by UN staff, especially stigma and discrimination in the workplace.

Wellness Approach

South Africa has been recognized for the use of a “wellness approach” in promoting HIV testing and other health issues. The UN Cares team in South Africa has engaged in the organization of an annual one-day staff and family health and wellness day that included services such as health services (testing of blood pressure, body mass index, glucose levels); HIV counselling and testing; fitness services; stress counselling; insurance consultations; consultations on a variety of organic household and skincare products, and massage sessions. Program activities have led to a significant increase in uptake of HIV testing and counselling services; increase in demand and attendance in UN Cares activities; staff taking responsibility for their health, and improved accessibility of services. Organization of wellness days have been found to serve as a fun and interactive way to promote testing and counselling services to employees. The inclusion of HIV services with other services at these events is believed to lower the barrier of stigma to testing.

Background and context

South Africa has a generalized HIV epidemic, which has stabilized over the past four years at a national antenatal prevalence of approximately 17.30 per cent.¹ Data from population-based sero-surveys and sentinel surveillance of pregnant women suggest that the HIV epidemic has reached a plateau in South Africa.² Although HIV prevalence has plateaued, the absolute number of people living with HIV (PLHIV) is on a steep increase of approximately 100,000 additional PLHIV each year.²

It is assumed that, as a country with the largest number of people living with HIV, a significant number of UN personnel in the country would be living with HIV. Living a longer, healthier and more productive life with HIV requires healthcare beyond managing the virus and includes taking care of general health and wellness. Ensuring proper diet and nutrition; exercise and fitness; keeping away and protection from opportunistic infections, and generally slowing down progression to AIDS are all key in maintaining a healthy life for people living with HIV.

The UN Cares team in South Africa has dedicated efforts towards the adoption of broader health and wellness approaches to address the HIV and AIDS-related challenges faced by UN staff, especially stigma and discrimination in the workplace. The UN Cares team in South Africa has been recognized for their exemplary work on wellness in the 2013 UN Cares case study reports.

UN Cares structure / Leadership of and Advocacy for UN Cares

UN Cares, the United Nations Workplace Programme on HIV was conceived and has been implemented over the last five years of its existence in South Africa, as a purely HIV response programme.

Stemming from the need to effectively address both the health needs of UN staff and the presence of HIV-related stigma and discrimination, the United Nations workplace program on HIV in South Africa has broadened its scope of

activities to include broader staff health and wellness activities since 2008.

This health and wellness approach adopted aims at providing comprehensive health and wellness information and services to UN personnel and their families, enabling them to make responsible choices for their health and wellbeing. There have been a variety of activities in this approach with three key activities standing out. These activities include:

- The UN staff and family health and wellness days;

- Edu-tainment days with health information for children of UN personnel aged between 5 and 16 years;

- Health and wellness training sessions to staff on a variety of health and wellness topics.

Sources of Funding

Funding for UN Cares activities is through joint contributions made by the UN Agencies in the country. The UN Cares team draws up their annual workplan and budget. Every Agency is allocated a portion of the budget based on their staffing. Agencies have also offered to fund whole activities. The UN Cares Health and Wellness Days were solely funded by UNFPA from 2010 to 2012.

UN Cares-Approaches adopted

As part of the adoption of health and wellness approaches in the workplace, the UN Cares team in Johannesburg organizes an annual one-day staff and family health and wellness day. On this day, general health and wellness services including mainly health and wellness examinations and consultations are offered to staff and their families at no cost to them.

The organization of the entire event is outsourced to a workplace health and wellness company that then assembles all the services and service providers. The company produces a report of the event at the end, providing analysis of attendance and general outcomes. This report includes:

- Participant demographics: Information on gender, age and race of participants is presented.

- Health indicators: The report provides information on the impact of various health risk factors such as glucose levels, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, frequency of exercise, smoking, body mass index, body fat percentage, and family history. The report also documents the percentage of individuals at risk for each of the health indicators from the pool of participants.

- Use of wellness services: The report presents information on the number of participants that made use of the various wellness services offered.

- Aggregated risk for groups: As part of health risk assessment, the report provides an aggregated risk for various groups that serves useful in the identification of major risk factors that would need to be addressed in future programme activities.

- Recommendations and future interventions: Based on an analysis of the risks identified during the wellness days and the aggregated 'risk for group' analysis, the report presents possible corporate strategies with the ultimate goal to instill a culture of wellness within the organization.

The health and wellness activities, like all other UN Cares services, are open to all personnel. They are also open to staff of contracted companies who are part of the UN workplace. Every individual attending the event and taking the health checks is provided with a confidential diagnostic report for their own follow-up. Cases that need treatment are followed up by individuals in private, either with the companies or through a medical facility. Payments are settled through their medical insurance coverage. The package on offer mostly includes the following services:

- Health services: Health education, consultations and general examinations, including HIV testing; cholesterol check, measurement of cholesterol level, body mass index, blood pressure and blood sugar; ophthalmological checks; cancer consultations; and sexual and reproductive health consultations for males and females and for couples. In addition, there are men and women health experts, and blood donation services.
- HIV Counselling and Testing: HIV Testing and Counselling services are on offer in a private place within the compound.
- Fitness services: Physical fitness consultations with a reputable gym or fitness company are provided.
- Stress Counselling: The UN Stress Counsellor is always on the ground to provide counselling services.
- Insurance consultations: Medical and general insurance consultations with major medical and general insurance service providers are available.
- Organic Worx: Consultations on a variety of organic household and skincare products are provided.
- Massage sessions: 15-minute pamper sessions for each employee for shoulder and back massage by a professional massage therapist are provided.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In the conducting of these health and wellness events, the UN Cares team has reported the following results:

- ***An increase in uptake of HIV-related services:*** A significant increase in the uptake of HIV testing and counselling services on offer has been reported. In 2011, of the 121 individuals who reported taking health assessments on the health and wellness day, 85 reported taking an HIV test, translating to a more than 70 per cent uptake of HIV testing and counselling services. This significant increase in uptake cannot be realized through exclusive HIV testing campaigns.
- The increase in uptake can be attributed to one main reason. Although having HIV counselling and testing services in a separate room does not totally eliminate the stigma, it has been noticed that staff are more

encouraged to go ahead and test for HIV once they have started other medical tests and exams. The challenge has always been to get staff out of their desks to come forward for HIV exclusive services. HIV testing and counselling services are embedded in the middle of the other exams and testing and not at the beginning, the end, or in a totally different building. Therefore, it has been found that it is easier to take the HIV test before proceeding with other tests.

- **Increased demand and attendance in UN Cares activities:** An increase in both demand and attendance in UN Cares activities because of the quality of services offered has been recorded. UN personnel now expect to find useful information, services and products offered whenever there is a UN Cares event.
- **Staff taking responsibility for their health:** The health and wellness events that have been organized have raised health consciousness of UN personnel with noticeable health-seeking behaviour through the enquiries made to UN Cares focal points by UN personnel. Accessibility of services: The health and wellness events have greatly improved access to health services that were previously only accessed through medical facilities.
- **Improved funding:** UN Agencies have taken up the event enthusiastically. As a result, it has become easier to mobilize resources, especially for this single event. This is due to the noticeable benefits to UN personnel.

Although having HIV counselling and testing services in a separate room does not totally eliminate the stigma, it has been noticed that staff are more encouraged to go ahead and test for HIV once they have started other medical tests and exams

Barriers

Barriers in effectively addressing HIV related issues in the workplace as identified by the UN Cares team of South Africa include:

- **Persistence of HIV-related stigma and discrimination:** Even with an HIV prevalence of approximately 17.3 per cent, there are still high levels of HIV-related stigma that prevent staff from freely and openly coming forward to access available HIV response services. In a closed environment like a UN workplace, the experience has been that due to the decades old stigma associated with HIV, there has been a poor uptake and turnout to exclusive HIV activities. For instance, the numbers of UN personnel that have turned out for HIV testing campaigns have been less than impressive, because few want to be seen turning up to test for HIV. The same response has been recorded during HIV learning activities.
- **Lack of Funding:** Lack of funding serves as a barrier in the addressing of HIV-related issues in the workplace. Exclusive HIV activities have become increasingly difficult for UN Care teams to mobilize funding for, because of questions around prioritizing one medical condition against other competing workplace health issues.

Advice to other UN Cares teams

In the past three years that this event has been organized, it has continued to be the most anticipated and best attended all-staff event in the annual calendar of

the United Nations Offices in Johannesburg.

Using a health and wellness approach broadens the scope of intervention and has proven quite appealing to the benefactors of the programme in South Africa. UNFPA has every year easily paid the bill because more personnel get to have access to more services than just HIV. UN Cares teams have through the years struggled to get staff to partake of their HIV services. Health and Wellness days are a perfect solution. In addition, health and wellness services are a perfect way to reach out to a broader constituency beyond UN personnel. It has been a way for the UN Cares team to reach family members of UN personnel.

Persistence of HIV-related stigma and discrimination: Even with an HIV prevalence of approximately 17.3 per cent, there are still high levels of HIV-related stigma that prevent staff from freely and openly coming forward to access available HIV response services.

Future projects/Plans

The UN Cares team in South Africa plans to continue to organize the health and wellness events as an annual event. Since in most UN medical insurance schemes, there is a provision for one annual comprehensive medical exam, there are regional plans to bring in and work with the UN medical insurance administrators, including GMC and Vanbreda, in the future. As part of this plan, countries could work with these administrators to outsource the event to one company and to directly bill the administrators, depending on the coverage of individuals. Medical insurance schemes provide for one comprehensive medical exam, limiting them from being scattered across the year from different medical facilities. It is cheaper administratively to have them all done by one provider on one day, and bills sent directly in one batch. In addition, it is also cheaper for the UN insurance schemes because it guarantees that everyone coming for the services gets to know the status of their health, which helps to avert late diagnosis of medical conditions that results in expensive treatment.

Sources

- UNAIDS. HIV and AIDS Estimates 2011: Retrieved online on July 10, 2013, at <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/southafrica/>
- UNGASS. Global AIDS Response Progress Report 2012. Republic of South Africa.
- Available at: http://www.unaids.org/en/dataanalysis/knowyourresponse/countryprogressreports/2012countries/ce_ZA_Narrative_Report.pdf