

# Provider-Initiated HIV Testing and Counseling:

## How did we get here and where are we going?

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**Issues:** The past few years have seen a resurgence of interest and increasingly polarized debate around HIV counseling and testing, with the most intense debate centering around the benefits and pitfalls of voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) as opposed to provider-initiated testing and counseling (PITC). Testing uptake has remained low, drawing attention to the need to explore new testing strategies.

### The Evolution of Global HIV Counseling and Testing Policies

1. HIV tests become available
2. Governments focus testing policies on:
  - a. Blood supply and products
  - b. Immigrants e.g. students, Haitians etc.
  - c. Other population sub-groups such as sex workers, injecting drug users, MSM.
3. Evidence emerges that mandatory HIV testing drives people underground. Confidentiality, counseling and consent begin to be seen as integral.

1. WHO issues global guidelines emphasizing the need for testing to be voluntary. Hence the birth of VCT.
2. Respect for human rights in HIV testing comes to be seen not only as a legal obligation but as good public health.
3. Changes to the HIV testing environment:
  - a. Low uptake of VCT
  - b. Increased availability of antiretroviral therapy (ART)

1980s

1990s

2000s

Moving forward

1. Changes to the HIV testing environment:
  - a. Availability of rapid HIV tests
2. Emergence of targets for the number of people on ART leading to high targets for HIV testing
3. WHO/UNAIDS issues policy statement on HIV testing; distinguishes between client-initiated and provider-initiated testing and counseling
4. Emerging testing strategies - PITC, household testing, mobile testing, etc. increasingly common.

New testing strategies?

**Description:** A wide range of new testing strategies is emerging, each designed to overcome some of the limitations of traditional VCT. As countries move forward with implementing HIV testing strategies, including PITC, as well as with designing new approaches, there is a need to critically recall the ways in which current strategies have evolved in order to ensure that lessons learned to date inform global and national efforts.

**Lessons Learned:** The evolution of HIV testing has shown that, irrespective of the chosen strategy, attention to certain key issues is fundamental to ensuring success:

- An **enabling environment**, including laws and policies that ensure non-discrimination, prohibit mandatory testing, and promote uptake and connection to services.
- **Informed consent**, including appropriate mechanisms to ensure informed consent for women who present in labor and are unaware of their HIV status, as well as children and adolescents.
- **Confidentiality**, including ensuring appropriate disclosure where necessary and adequate training and support of health professionals.
- **Counseling**, including appropriate pre- and post-test counseling for all clients including referral to prevention, treatment, care and support services as required
- **Attention to vulnerable populations**, including ensuring that vulnerable populations are not adversely impacted by HIV testing policies or programs and that they can access the services required.
- **Sustained connection** to HIV prevention, treatment and care services, including appropriate referral and follow-up.

**Next Steps:** Policy development, as well as planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of HIV counseling and testing must consider not only access to HIV testing and risk reduction counseling but also assessment of the enabling environment, the HIV testing process itself (e.g. pre- and post-test counseling, informed consent, assurance of confidentiality etc.), and the success in connecting people to health services over time. With global attention currently focused on PITC scale-up, it is critical that these lessons not be forgotten.