

Since its launch in 1998, Aid for AIDS has become the leading provider of HIV services to companies and medical schemes throughout Southern Africa. There are more than 70,000 people living with HIV/AIDS currently registered on the disease management aspect of the programme.

Aid for AIDS carried out its first corporate voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) campaign in November 2004 and since then has completed over 250 campaigns in various industries that include mining, chemical, industrial and financial services. Over 75,000 people have gone through the Aid for AIDS VCT testing process and that figure includes employees, their dependants and contract workers. Over the years, Aid for AIDS have built up a wealth of experience and have been able to identify many reasons why it's vital that corporate HIV testing and disease management go hand in hand.

When it comes to HIV testing the overall ethos needs to be one of respect and support for the individual. By using a coordinated and planned process of mobilisation, incredible levels of participation can be derived. When best practice is followed, it's possible to have over 90% of employees, dependents or contractors of any given group enthusiastically participating in the process. It is crucial that testing for HIV should be done within in the realms of human rights legislation, The Constitution and well established national and international guidelines. HIV testing can involve the diagnosing of a chronic condition and must be done with respect and dignity. Participants need to feel the environment is safe and be completely assured that confidentiality will be maintained throughout the process. It must be made absolutely clear that their result will not be disclosed to others without their prior consent.

Another aspect of HIV testing involves ensuring that the highest levels of quality are maintained throughout the process. This quality check has to include the use of appropriately trained health care professionals, the correct use of the test kits, confirmation of one blood rapid test with another if the first tests positive and, crucially, the quality and effectiveness of pre and post test counselling.

VCT remains the critical entry point for HIV/AIDS prevention and interventions and should no longer be viewed merely as a diagnosis strategy. It is based on the individual's need to know their HIV status for the purpose of changing their behaviour and because of this it is imperative that organisations create a well planned and coordinated approach when undertaking a VCT campaign. It is an unfortunate waste of resources to place a couple of nurses in an office on World AIDS Day in the hopes this will be sufficient to draw people in for testing.

If you want good turnout at a VCT campaign you must go through the process of creating the best most conducive environment for quality testing. Aid for AIDS believes it is not only possible but indeed essential to incorporate a high quality approach, even when attempting a high volume campaign. A good place to start is with a campaign of 'social mobilisation' as a precursor to the main event. Successfully run, such mobilisation can reduce the stigma of HIV/AIDS through knowledge and awareness. It will provide employees with the understanding that their employer can be trusted, is sensitive to their circumstances and is committed to providing sustained assistance to those

employees living with HIV. Once this message is received, employees are comfortable to test and to enrol on the care and treatment programmes provided either via the medical scheme or the company funded treatment programme. Sound training of peer educators and managers on all aspects relating to HIV and the VCT is vital at this stage.

At the commencement of the campaign all employees should be encouraged to participate in group information sessions that aim to alleviate any concerns employees may have about getting tested. These sessions should educate participants on why they should get tested, why it is important to know your HIV status, some basic information on HIV/AIDS and what options would be available if they do test positive .

Testing provides HIV-positive individuals with the opportunity to take care of their health so as to slow down the progression of the disease. It is critical that as part of the support provided, all participants who test positive are appropriately counselled and offered a follow up telephonic counselling session. One of the many aims of corporate HIV testing is to link the individual to a disease management programme that aims to manage a patient's health and wellness. It has been proven that employees who are not committed to enrolment immediately at the point of diagnosis have for various reasons second thoughts (distrust of the process, confidentiality issues etc) and end up not enrolling. Furthermore it is in the individual's best interest if they register on the programme prior to commencing antiretroviral therapy.

Aid for AIDS fully supports the notion that VCT is an essential tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. There is a right way to use that tool and a wrong way as well. The wrong way only pays attention to the numbers of people going through the process without any forethought as to how one motivates, cares for and keeps in touch with those testing positive. The right way is informative, inspirational, sustainable and effective in not only getting care to those testing positive but also in offering pause for thought to those not infected. It is not only current but also future behaviour that needs to be changed and managed in order to attain the dream of an HIV free nation.

