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SNAPSHOT

Care That Restores Hope

Home-based counseling and care helps HIV positive mother stay on treatment



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Alem Gizaw, an HIV positive mother who previously defaulted from HIV treatment but is now back to treatment thanks to an urban health extension worker's home based counseling. Assela, Ethiopia.

SEUHP, the USAID supported program, trains urban health extension professionals (UHE-ps) and works to improve quality and reach of UEH-ps health care service for the urban poor.

Eight years have passed since 36-year-old Alem Gizaw learned that she was HIV positive. It was around the same time that Alem lost her former husband and her newborn child to HIV. She now lives in a small house with her current husband, who is also HIV positive, and her four children in a small town called Asella located in the Arsi Zone of the Oromia Region, about 175 kilometers from Addis Ababa.

Since she first learned of her HIV status, Alem has been on Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) which she receives from the nearby Asella #1 health center. Alem is most grateful that all of her children are free from HIV, which she believes is due to her consistent use of the ARV medications. But recently, Alem gave up on taking her medication out of exhaustion.

"I lost purpose in my life. I sometimes feel like God wants me to die and I am fighting against his will by taking the medicines. I was fed up."

Alem stopped taking her medication for almost three months, and to make matters worse, she made this decision while she was breastfeeding her newborn.

This was until Saida Abdulmelied, an urban health extension professional (UHE-p) supported by the USAID-funded program Strengthening Ethiopia's Urban Health Program (SEUHP), found out that Alem had defaulted from treatment during one of her routine home-based counseling visits. Saida provides home-based health education and health care services for 453 households in the neighborhood customarily called Hanku, in Kebele 06 of Asella town.

Poor adherence and defaulting from ART treatment represent major challenges for the ART program in Ethiopia. It also increases the risk of drug resistance and treatment failure and increases AIDS related morbidity, mortality and hospitalizations. Only 70.3% of individuals who have ever started ART are currently on treatment.¹

With Saida's follow up and counseling, Alem is now back on treatment. "When Saida sat down with me, I told her how I was feeling and that I quit taking my medicine. She counseled me

¹ Federal HAPCO, Country progress report on the HIV response, 2014, Ethiopia.

on the importance of taking my medicine and convinced me to get back to treatment. She is now my close contact for any doubts and questions I have about the treatment.”

UHE-ps like Saida serve as bridges between health facilities and communities. They diagnose and refer people to health centers, and also receive follow up and defaulter tracing requests from health centers for HIV, TB, maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH) and other health care services. To strengthen this link, the SEUHP program has supported the establishment of efficient referral systems and strengthened linkages between health facilities and UHE-ps. In collaboration with Federal and Regional Health Bureaus, the program facilitated the use of standard referral forms and created platforms for monthly meetings between UHE-ps and health center staff. According to Saida, this system has helped UHE-ps to make efficient referrals and receive feedback from health facilities.

In FY15 more than 78,000 referrals were made by UHE-ps to health centers in SEUHP supported cities/towns and more than 1,100 defaulters were traced and referred back to ART.

SEUHP also works to improve the knowledge and skills of UHE-ps through training, supportive supervision, and job-aids to increase UHE-ps service quality and reach. Saida maintains that the training on HIV and the ongoing technical support she received from the program helped her provide better home-based HIV services. In addition to HIV, SEUHP provides training on core public health issues including, MNCH, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and Interpersonal Communications (IPC) for an estimated 1,823 UHE-ps.

Saida continues to visit Alem and ensures that she continues with her ART. Alem appreciates Saida and the dedication she shows for her work: “Having a professional at my house to share my worries and doubts about my health, for free, is a gift. Saida gave me the courage to live better and to raise my kids better”.