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Depression: caregivers of perinatally acquired HIV adolescents at high risk

A first-of-its-kind study by the University of Cape Town's (UCT) mental health experts found that caregivers of perinatally acquired HIV (PHIV) adolescents were at high risk of depression. According to experts, the findings highlight the need for adequate intervention strategies to provide resources and social support to caregivers to improve their mental health.

Published in the [*Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*](#), the study found that depression in caregivers was associated with poor physical health, poor overall quality of life, and externalising and internalising behaviour problems in PHIV adolescents. The main concerns of caregivers included educational or learning and health problems in PHIV adolescents.

The study assessed depression, socioeconomic factors, and quality of life in 121 caregivers at baseline and 36 months follow-up. With increased access to resources and social support and improvement of physical health and overall quality of life, the study found that the risk of depression in caregivers decreased significantly at follow-up.

The experts cited that caring for PHIV adolescents brings new and unique challenges compared to caring for younger children and infants living with HIV, which may contribute to decreased caregiver depression at follow-up. One reason is that adolescents are able to make more autonomous decisions and may demand less attention from their caregivers.

Professor Jackie Hoare, the head of the Division of Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry and the study's principal investigator, said: "With increased access to antiretroviral therapy more children living with HIV are surviving into adolescence. In South Africa alone there are 360 000 adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 living with HIV many with PHIV.

"In South Africa, biological mothers frequently carry the double burden of living with HIV themselves as well as caring for their children living with HIV. In addition, many children orphaned due to HIV and AIDS are cared for by their grandmothers, aunts or older siblings who in many cases already have other children to care for. This added responsibility often creates a toll on the caregivers' mental health."

With caregivers in the study women, Hoare noted that they are disproportionately more affected by HIV; therefore, mental health disorders and depression associated with caring for children living with HIV are more prevalent in women.

"Women are more likely to take on the role as a caregiver for numerous reasons such as traditional gender roles and an absence of men in the household due to death, abandonment or income generating activities. Studies have indicated that if the biological mother has died

or can no longer take care of their children then the grandmother will normally take on this role as caregiver," she said.

It is important to encourage men to take more responsibility in caring for PHIV adolescents, Hoare said.

The caregivers enrolled in the study had improved access to information, care and counselling for their adolescents over the duration of the study; based on findings in previous studies, Hoare said this support may have mitigated many depressive symptoms measured at follow-up.

ENDS

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