



## COMMUNICATION IN ELIMINATION OF MOTHER TO CHILD TRANSMISSION (MTCT) OF HIV

**Silas Esther A<sup>1</sup>, Clementina U. Nwankwo<sup>1</sup> and Obidife Ifeoma H<sup>1</sup>**

*Department of Nursing Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract:** *Communication is the process of transmitting or transferring information, thought and ideas from one person to another. The information moves from a sender through a channel to a receiver who gives a feedback. Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks and weakens the immune system thereby rendering the infected individual susceptible to infections. It can be transmitted from a pregnant woman to her baby during pregnancy, labour and breastfeeding. This transmission can also be eliminated/prevented. Communication in elimination of mother to child transmission (EMTCT) of HIV entails transmission of relevant information on PMTCT services so as to prevent the transmission of the virus from mother to child. To effectively communicate to HIV positive mothers, ten skills of effective communication which include verbal and non-verbal skills, active listening, written communication, patient education, trust, compassion, cultural awareness, making personal connections, presentation skills and written communication, are to be adopted. Barriers to effective communication can be physical, psychological or social.*

**Keywords:** Communication, HIV, Pregnancy, Mother, Child.

### Introduction

HIV is a deadly virus that attacks the immune system and weakens it thereby rendering the affected individual susceptible to infection. This virus can be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding but the transmission can be prevented if Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) services are strictly utilized. Communication is the art of transferring information from one person to another. It is very important in eliminating MTCT as only well informed mothers will know of and effectively utilize PMTCT services.

### Objectives

This paper aims to:

1. describe the concept of communication
2. discuss HIV, HIV in pregnancy and its prevalence
3. define MTCT and EMTCT

4. explain communication in EMTCT and its importance
5. highlight effective communication skills for nurses

### Concept of Communication

Communication is defined as imparting or exchanging information, thoughts or ideas using speech, writing, or some other medium such as signals or behavior (Ali, 2017). According to Ilang and Ikelle (2019) communication is a process of sharing meanings, ideas, information and feelings. Obe cited in Ilang and Ikelle (2019) opined that communication is a common phenomenon that cuts across the daily activities of human beings. He opined that communication is as important for survival as food and water. Communication usually involves a sender, message to be sent, channel through which the message passes through, receiver and feedback. Daniel (2016) asserts that it is when feedback, which involves the receiver responding to the signal by initiating another circle of



meaning exchange, has been sent to the sender(source) that the communication process has gone full circle and become complete.

Most importantly, effective communication protects patients from potential harm arising from misunderstandings. Effective communication can: enhance the patient's experience, reduce complaints and increase nurses' self-confidence, professional standing, career prospects and job satisfaction and reduce stress (Ali, 2017).

### **HIV, HIV in Pregnancy and its Prevalence**

According to World Health Organization (2021), the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that targets the immune system and weakens people's defense against many infections and some types of cancer that people with healthy immune systems can fight off.

HIV continues to be a major global public health issue, having claimed 36.3 million. Nigeria has the second largest HIV epidemic in the world. The country currently accounts for 3.2 million PLWHIV with an average of 160,000 AIDS-related deaths annually. Of the estimated 220,000 new infections in Nigeria, 37,000 were from mother-to-child transmission (UNAID, 2018; NACA, 2015).

### **Mother to Child Transmission (MTCT) of HIV**

MTCT of HIV occurs when HIV is transmitted from a woman living with HIV to her baby during pregnancy, labour or delivery, or after delivery through breastfeeding. Without treatment, approximately 15 – 30% of infants born to HIV-positive women will become infected with HIV during gestation and delivery, with a further 5 – 15% becoming infected through breastfeeding (UNAIDS, 2017). HIV infection of infants results in early mortality for many or creates a lifelong chronic condition that greatly shortens life expectancy and contributes to substantial human, social and economic costs.

Primary prevention of HIV, prevention of unintended pregnancies, effective access to HIV testing and counselling, initiation of lifelong antiretroviral therapy

(ART) with support for adherence, retention and viral suppression for mothers living with HIV, safe delivery practices, optimal infant-feeding practices and access to postnatal antiretroviral (ARV) prophylaxis for infants all contribute to the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT), thereby reducing maternal and child mortality.

### **Elimination of Mother to Child Transmission (EMTCT) of HIV**

With the global shift to highly effective and simplified interventions based on lifelong maternal ART, it is now feasible to virtually eliminate new HIV infections in infants, while assuring the health of the mother (WHO, 2016). In public health, elimination is generally defined as reduction to zero of the incidence of a disease or infection in a defined geographical area (Dowdle, 1998). However, because HIV remains public health issues and PMTCT measures are highly but not 100% effective, currently it is not feasible in most settings to reduce MTCT of either infection to zero. Therefore, the goal for EMTCT initiatives is to reduce and ensure services to maintain MTCT of HIV and syphilis at a very low level, such that it is no longer a public health problem.

The following strategies are important components of successful EMTCT programmes:

- interruption of transmission through quality ANC and prevention services that provide timely identification and treatment of pregnant women infected with HIV or syphilis, their sexual partners, and their infants;
- reduction in the number of HIV infections among pregnant women through:
  - prevention of HIV infection in women of reproductive age, including in HIV-negative pregnant and breastfeeding women and their sexual partners;
  - promotion of a healthy reproductive life, including prevention of unintended pregnancies and support for safer conception among women with known HIV infection;



– control of HIV and syphilis in the general and key populations (including sex workers, drug users, men who have sex with men) to decrease prevalence.

- promotion and protection of the human rights and gender equality of women living with HIV;
- greater engagement of women living with HIV in HIV programming, decision-making and service delivery.

### **Communication in EMTCT and Its Importance**

Communication in elimination of mother to child transmission (EMTCT) of HIV entails transmission of relevant information on PMTCT services which include: prevention of unintended pregnancies, effective access to HIV testing and counselling, initiation of lifelong antiretroviral therapy (ART) with support for adherence, retention and viral suppression for mothers living with HIV, safe delivery practices, optimal infant-feeding practices and access to postnatal antiretroviral (ARV) prophylaxis for infants by the nurse to HIV positive pregnant women, intending mothers and HIV positive breastfeeding women. This can be done in antenatal clinic, labour ward, postnatal ward, postnatal clinic or even during follow up.

Having good communication skills is essential to patient-centered care which is of major concern in this paper. Nurses who take the time to listen and understand the concerns of each of their patients are better prepared to address issues as they arise, resulting in better patient outcomes. Conversely, poor communication, or lack of communication, can lead to patients misunderstanding directions and failing to follow treatment protocols. It can also lead to workflow breakdowns on the team, resulting in medical errors. A report by the Joint Commission (2019) found that poor communication during patient transfers contributed to 80% of serious medical errors. That is the inability of the nurse in labour ward to communicate with the nurse in the postnatal ward on the antiretroviral drug to be administered to the baby during transfer from labour ward to postnatal ward can increase the baby's risk of

becoming infected. Hence, nurses need some skills to achieve effective communication in nursing practice.

### **Ten Effective Communication Skills for Nurses**

For nurses, good communication means approaching every patient interaction with the intention to understand the patient's concerns, experiences, and opinions. Appropriate communication skills can help nurses and other health care providers identify patient's problem more accurately, ensuring that the patient's perspectives are considered so that greater client satisfaction is achieved (Klein, 2005). Below, we explore 10 communication skills that are important for nurses as identified by USAHS (2021);

#### **1. Verbal Communication**

Excellent verbal communication is key. Aim to always speak with clarity, accuracy, and honesty. It is also important to know your audience and speak appropriately according to the person's age, culture, and level of health literacy. If you are feeling stressed out or frustrated, be aware of your tone of voice and do not let these emotions leak into your patient interaction. Use the patient's first name or name of choice instead of pet names.

#### **2. Nonverbal Communication**

Using elements of nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, eye contact, body language, gestures, posture, and tone of voice is also essential in creating rapport. Simply smiling can go a long way. Show interest in what the patient is saying by maintaining eye contact and nodding your head.

#### **3. Active Listening**

This means listening in order to understand the other person's experience. This skill is important not only for clinical nurses, but also for nurse executives as a tool for building trust and commitment with their staff. Example: Including minimal verbal encouragement, such as "I understand" and "go on" in one's interaction.

#### **4. Written Communication**

Written communication skills are also essential for



effective nurse-to-nurse communication. As a nurse, you will be responsible for creating and updating patient records. It is critical that records are accurate and current so your patients can receive the best care possible. Also remember to protect patient confidentiality.

#### **5. Presentation Skills**

Effective presentation skills are most applicable during “handover” when you are transferring patient care to another nurse. These skills will also help you demonstrate your knowledge and expertise clearly in a variety of workplace settings, such as presenting at conferences, during antenatal care, participating in job interviews, giving case reports to physicians, and more.

#### **6. Patient Education (Patient Teach-Back)**

Patient teach-back is an effective communication strategy where providers ask patients to repeat the information back to them. This method improves patient understanding and encourages adherence to care instructions. For example, you can say: “We have gone over a lot of information. Now I would like you to repeat it back to me to make sure you remember everything”.

#### **7. Making Personal Connections**

It is important to get to know the person behind the patient. Patient-centered relationships are critical in helping patients feel safe and comfortable. Creating meaningful connections with patients can improve outcomes and trust.

#### **8. Trust**

It is important for healthcare professionals to inspire trust in patients by listening actively and taking every complaint and concern seriously. Building trust takes time. Healthcare settings are scary for some patients. It is important to make them feel as comfortable as possible.

To inspire trust, nurse leaders and educators should:

- Always tell the truth.
- Share information openly.
- Be willing to admit mistakes.

#### **9. Cultural Awareness**

You will likely work with people every day who come from a wide range of social, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Every patient and coworker is unique, and it is important to be aware and sensitive.

#### **10. Compassion**

Conveying compassion is an essential communication skill in healthcare. According to Papadopoulos, Shea, Taylor, et al.(2016), studies have shown that compassion can assist in prompting fast recovery from acute illness, enhancing the management of chronic illness, and relieving anxiety. However, there are some barriers that hinder effective communication which need to be explored here and how to overcome them.

#### **Communication Barriers in Nursing and How to overcome them**

Sometimes the message sent is not always received the way it was desired. Communication barriers in nursing result in weak patient-nurse interactions and relationships. To overcome these, we must first understand the types of communication barriers that nurses face. Weaver (2013) identifies three common communication barriers in nursing: physical, social, and psychological.

**Physical Barrier:** Busy, loud, and distracting settings can increase patients’ stress. To create a safe and comfortable environment, try closing doors, opening blinds, and mitigating outside noises whenever you can.

**Social Barriers:** Social barriers include differences in language, religion, culture, age, and customs. Understanding each patient’s cultural background can help nurses avoid prejudice and communicate clearly.

**Psychological Barriers:** For many patients, a trip to the doctor is anxiety-inducing. Anxiety and stress are psychological barriers, as are dementia and other cognitive conditions. To help reduce their influence, it helps to take extra time to listen, empathize, and be supportive.

#### **Conclusion**

Effective communication is very essential in the healthcare



setting for set goals to be properly achieved. The Holy Scripture says in Hosea 4:6a a ‘My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge’. If HIV positive pregnant and intending mothers are not well informed by healthcare providers especially by nurses who they constantly come in contact with, they will not know what is expected of them hence eliminating mother to child transmission of HIV will not be possible.

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