

FAMILY LIFE

To test for Aids or not?

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and medical director of Nyumbani children's home for Aids orphans.

Fr D'Agostino, a medical doctor, says that people should do a test to confirm they are safe from Aids. "It doesn't mean they can get it only through sexual relationships but can contract Aids through blood transfusion and sharing of needles. It is good to know one's health status."

The Rev Joseph Maina of Gospel Covenant Church says that testing for Aids will depend on a couple's choice but the church does not insist on people undergoing medical tests.

"We expose issues like Aids to couples during counselling and suggest that it is good for them to know that they are not risking their lives, but we don't make it a requirement before marriage."

The Kenya Human Rights Commission says that, undergoing an Aids test is okay if the idea originates from the partners themselves.

"But if it is compulsion from authority — church or government — then that is wrong because people have a right to privacy. The stigmatisation of people who have tested positive in Aids tests is dehumanising and it is a human rights violation," says Stephen Ouma, who is in charge of the organisation's advocacy programme.

He says that, it is callous when one partner knows he or she is HIV-positive and conceals the information, goes on and marries another person. "This is denying the other person a right to life."

Going for the test before marriage is a good step, says counselling psychologist Asha Oluoch. "It is good to know that you and the partner you are marrying are safe. It is disastrous after a colourful wedding to lament a few days later; regretting that you wish you knew doesn't help when it is too late."

Voluntary HIV testing a difficult decision to make

By PHILO IKONYA

On her own accord, Jane decided to test her HIV status. Before she took the plunge, she confided in a male colleague.

The man, a diplomat, told her he was scared when asked to undergo an Aids test before leaving his country despite being faithful to his wife for their 20 years of marriage.

When he got the results sheet, he raced through a catalogue of about 30 tests with his finger speeding right down to spot HIV. It was negative. Instead of taking a sigh of relief, he went on to read the asterisks at the bottom of the page which advised frequent tests.

He laughs now when recalling how he had not seen those asterisks on all the pages since they refer to all tests taken and had made up his mind that they were asking him to test for HIV again!

Testing for the HIV virus is difficult even for people with remote chances of contracting the disease. It is always frightening.

But with this reassurance from the colleague, Jane went ahead to take the test.

The mother of one, was going for the test although her partner was not for it, preferring to live in ignorance.

That morning, Jane picked up the phone and booked an appointment at Nyumbani Labs. The manager told her she could choose to come any day as the laboratory was open 24 hours a day including Sundays.

The following day she was at the lab. Jane was no stranger to this home of Aids orphans but she had not tried to find out more about the labs before. Somehow she felt that if she left this matter for later, she might never be courageous enough to handle it. This was the time.



University of Nairobi scientists conduct Aids research in a laboratory: Taking an Aids test is a step which many Kenyans are afraid to take. (File picture)

Earlier, as she drove herself there, she thought of the 'what ifs' and 'so whats'. But despite her courage her soul was restless. She had a sore throat and her voice was hoarse. Furthermore, she was wondering whether little wounds and dry patches she gets on her skin were a sign of lack of vitamin E and C, or if her resistance had gone down.

At Nyumbani, after paying the lab fees, she was advised to go for a short counselling session. It appeared to her that the Catholic sister had nothing much to say in terms of advice. Later she realised it was a clever setting for Jane to express her anxieties.

After a short question and answer session, Jane was ready. The nun also shared with her

experiences of people who test before their wedding only to find out that one of them or both are HIV-positive.

"Still, this is better than not testing, for where is your conscience if you are going to go ahead and have a baby knowing you are HIV-positive?" the nun posed.

The nun told Jane that Nyumbani was beginning to receive more individuals willing to test their status. She comforted her and congratulated her for taking the step. She told Jane that some people had failed to cope with HIV-positive results and many agonised after testing. Such people spend sleepless nights while waiting for their results. And sometimes, their lives change

dramatically after finding out all is not well.

While waiting for the test to be done, Jane thought of her five-year-old son. Her husband often remarked that he was not as healthy as he would have liked because he kept on getting tonsils and fevers from what doctors said are viral infections.

Jane, on her part, had found out that viral infections in children or adults did not mean HIV/Aids infection, but who was she to know?

Jane visited the little graveyard at Nyumbani and thought she was fortunate to have lived almost through her 30s. The little ones buried there were all under 13. She could bear the three days on which she had to wait which

included a Sunday. She thought about what she would do if she tested positive.

Rather than run away from getting her results (the nun had told her that some would test and never pick up the results), Jane kept close to Nyumbani. Indeed, that Sunday she went there for mass and had in her arms little Steve, nine months old, and HIV-positive.

She was not promiscuous, so she had nothing to improve on here. How she would handle her partner was the biggest dilemma. She was sure he could not live with such news. Anyway, personally she would take to dedicating more time to her son. Preparing for his life without her. She was sure that this was a more responsible way of reacting than leaving everything to chance.

"We owe knowing our status to each other; how can I walk around with something as dangerous as a time bomb and not take care that it doesn't detonate without my knowledge? On the other hand, why should I live in fear, worrying about every little cold and cough? I need my emotional energy for so many other things," she had told the nun.

When she got her results, there was no need to weep because she was given a clean bill of health. Her husband was courageous after seeing the results and went for a test as well.

When she shared her experience with her friends, they looked questioning at her. Some questioned the couple's behaviour, suggesting a possibility of infidelity.

But she had a firm message for them: Aids is not something to play around with. To curb deaths, everyone must wake up and reassess their morality.

Would you want to know your status?

"If I know that I have Aids, I will be killed faster psychologically. It is better for me to live the way I am — without knowing"

Story and pictures by JOSEPH MATHENGE

Should couples undergo an Aids test before marriage? We posed this question to people on the city streets and received differing opinions.

We also established that Aids testing is a very sensitive issue and many people who did not want their photographs taken treated us with suspicion.

One said it is not necessary to undergo the test because if he loves someone, whether that person has Aids or not, he will go ahead and marry them.

"My love will not change once I know her health status but we will have safe sex," he said.

Others argued that going for an Aids test is like signing a death certificate. "If I know that I have Aids, I will be killed faster psychologically. It is better for me to live the way I am — without knowing," said another respondent.

oving a person who has Aids



Nuru Mohammed: "Make testing compulsory"

is difficult, said another. "I don't want people to look at me with suspicion, imagining how I am feeling because I have Aids. It is better to live with the masses, the majority who don't know whether they have Aids or not. You can't run away from the stigma that follows people with Aids. It is disorienting, humiliating and hurting. Why should I voluntarily invite such a curse on myself?"

The sceptics say some people test positive when they are not. "A friend was almost dying from stress because of testing positive but when we advised her to go for another test and it turned negative, she added weight and started to live again."



Lily Atieno: "I've got to be psychologically prepared"

Apart from going for an Aids test, the courageous ones went further to say that everyone should take the test and show a valid certificate before engaging in intimate relationships.

A valid certificate means going for the test every six months. Because of vulnerability, there is a risk of infection even for those who have just had negative test results, they said.

Linda Omondi, says she cannot go for the test because she wouldn't know how to react if she turned positive.

"What if I test positive and I really want to marry that person? It is well and good for those who want to undergo the test but for me I think it is better to remain



Mark Marika. "What if I test positive?"

the way I am and take care of myself."

Lily Atieno says she would go for the test after she is psychologically prepared to know her status.

"It is important to go for the test in order to take care," says Lily.

Ivory Wanza said she cannot go for the test because she doesn't see the need to do so.

"Why should I go for the test? I know I haven't done anything bad," she said.

On his part, Simon Kamau does not see a problem in taking the test. He went for a test before joining the university.

"For you to be admitted to the university, one must have a



Ivory Wanza: "I cannot go for the test"

medical certificate which includes an HIV/Aids test. I have done it and I don't think there is anything wrong with someone knowing their status," he said.

"I will be reluctant to go for the test in case I test positive," says Mark Marika. "That thought scares me. It is good to go on living without knowing that you are HIV-positive than to lead a nightmarish life with the knowledge that you can die any time."

Nuru Mohammed says testing should be compulsory for those getting married. "I will definitely do the test before marrying someone; there is no option. It is good to know you are entering a union with a perfect health bill than starting life together with a 'what if' thought in your mind."



Simon Kamau: "I've done it, can do it again"



Linda Omondi: "What if I really want to marry?"