

TERRAINS OF HOPE: POINT-OF-CARE HIV VIRAL LOAD TESTING AND THE TOPOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS OF CARE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Background:

Papua New Guinea has the largest epidemic of HIV in the Pacific (~70,000 people). In response to the significant challenges impeding access to HIV viral load (VL) testing and treatment, ACTUP-PNG introduced point-of-care (POC) VL testing and infant diagnosis.

Methods:

Individual interviews were conducted between November 2022 and November 2023 at ACTUP sites (Port Moresby General Hospital and Mt Hagen Provincial Hospital) with 92 participants, including adults (n=24) and children aged >12 (n=8) with HIV, parents and guardians of children <10 years with HIV (n=8), peer counsellors (n=14), and key informants (health workers, program staff and policymakers; n=38). The analysis, grounded in the relational perspectives of Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, examines the production and experience how reconfigurations of care spaces – facilitated by POC VL testing – shape terrains of hope among stakeholders entangled within PNG's HIV care landscape.

Results:

POC testing unfolded profound terrains of hope and new care landscapes by reassembling networks of prevention, testing and treatment away from a centralised testing model. For persons with HIV, rapid results folded longstanding aspirations of living 'normal' lives and future hopes of health and parenthood – due to knowledge of their viral load status and of the significance of viral suppression in preventing transmission – into the immediate present. For key informants, the implementation of POC testing generated hope that PNG could realistically mitigate a worsening HIV epidemic. However, this spatio-temporal reconfiguration remains entangled with anxieties over PNG's socio-material context, with enduring logistical, financial, governance and societal challenges.

Conclusion:

This study reveals how POC HIV VL has transformative potential in reshaping terrains of hope for diverse groups of stakeholders, bolstering engagement, inspiring action and activating hope at the individual, clinical and policy levels. However, these spatio-temporal transformations highlight both the promise and precarity of PNG's HIV response as hope's terrains are redrawn.

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