

PrEParing the way

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President Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera took office on June 28 after winning presidential elections with 58.5 per cent of the vote.

With new leadership comes great responsibility as many Malawians are still living on less than a dollar per day, access to health services is still limited, incidents of gender based violence and intimate partner violence are widespread and HIV rates remain unacceptably high.

The new administration could reduce these challenges by more robustly supporting and expanding HIV prevention measures.

HIV and Aids remains a major health concern in the country, with new infections reaching 33 000 in 2019, according to the Malawi National Strategic Plan for HIV and Aids of 2020-2025.

Thankfully, there is a biomedical tool called oral PrEP that can greatly help reduce new infections.

PrEP, Pre-exposure prophylaxis,

uses antiretroviral medication (ARVs)—drugs created to treat people living with HIV—for HIV prevention.

It was recommended by the World Health Organisation in 2016 to be used as part of a combination prevention package, offered to people at high risk of acquiring HIV.

Oral PrEP is a pill taken every day to prevent HIV infection and is used in combination with other prevention interventions such as condoms and voluntary male circumcision.

Why is PrEP important?

When taken correctly and consistently, the pill reduces the risk of acquiring HIV by about 99 percent, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention reports.

When not taken consistently, it is much less effective.

The pill contains two medicines—tenofovir and emtricitabine—that protect an individual from HIV infection when he or she is exposed through sex or injection drug use.

Do we have PrEP in Malawi?

Oh yes!

PrEP in Malawi was provided to HIV-negative people as part



PHOTOGRAPH: NATION

New preventative medicine: PrEP

of demonstration studies in two districts of Lilongwe and Blantyre.

In Lilongwe, the study was implemented by Lighthouse Trust, which targeted adolescent girls and young women (AGYW).

In Blantyre, participants in the study by Pakachere Institute for Health Development and Communication comprised female sex workers.

Currently, PrEP has not been rolled out nationwide.

However, a call is rising for approval and implementation of PrEP guidelines and national roll-out.

PrEP was endorsed in the National HIV Policy in 2018.

The task force committee on PrEP which was established with a mandate to provide strategic direction and oversight for the implementation of PrEP in Malawi completed the tasks assigned through sub-committees.

However, the PrEP guidelines have yet to be approved.

The Department of HIV and Aids under the Ministry of Health are policy holders of PrEP.

The American Presidential Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (Pepfar) has committed to fund the roll out of PrEP in eleven districts in Malawi where Pepfar has projects.

The Bill of Rights in the Constitution mandates Malawi to make accessible health services to its people.

The delay in approving the guidelines directly delays the roll out of PrEP, an intervention that other African countries such as Kenya, eSwatini and South Africa are already implementing at larger scale to achieve the goal of eliminating HIV by 2030.

I call for the speedy approval of the PrEP guidelines so that we can protect many lives.

This is especially important now, as we are faced with the Covid-19, another pandemic that has claimed thousands of lives.

Let us not lose the gains we have already made on HIV.

Access to HIV prevention services is a human rights issue. ■