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Host Organization: SECTION27

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Host Country: South Africa

Project Title: Advocacy for access to Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis in Higher Education institutions

Problem statement

South Africa continues to see about 2000 HIV infections among young women aged between 15 to 24 years per week. A large fraction of this population group is found in higher education institutions. Most HIV prevention projects were targeted at the youth out of school, less effort was put on ensuring that young women in higher education institutions remain HIV negative. The last HIV survey to ever be conducted in higher education institutions was done in 2008. However, evidence shows that students are engaging in unprotected sex based on the alarming pregnancy and substance abuse rates. Being a former university graduate myself, I remembered how hard it was to get even an emergency contraceptive from our campus clinic. This motivated me to start a project that called for access to Pre Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) in higher education institutions.

The main objectives of the projects included the following:

- Advocacy to ensure that Higher Education students are included in the PrEP roll out plans especially young women and adolescent girls.
- Advocacy to ensure that campus health structures are sensitized on PrEP and other HIV prevention methods.
- Activating students' interest and activism around HIV prevention and PrEP.

Activities conducted

As a young activist in the field of HIV prevention advocacy, I had to first familiarize myself with more experienced activists, clinical researchers and other stakeholders. I met a lot of wonderful people who were very supportive through-out. This involved extensive desktop and field research and attending multiple meetings with different people in the field before the commencement of the project.

The activities conducted in the last year included the following:

- My first major activity was at the HEAIDS conference, where I conducted a survey on students' access to sexual and reproductive health services including HIV prevention from the campus health clinics. The HEAIDS conference was the first of its kind and was attended by students from different higher education institutions. I used this platform as an opportunity

to create awareness about PrEP through creative engagements with students involving games such as the scenarios game and darts. Through this activity I attained substantial information which gave me a clearer picture of what the situation was like.

- I organized a Youth dialogue on HIV prevention which was attended by students from higher education institutions in EThekweni and Johannesburg Districts, representatives from Wits Reproductive Health Institute (WRHI), FHI360 and International Partnership for Microbicides (IPM). The goal of the youth dialogue was to hear students' views on new HIV prevention technologies like PrEP and the Dapivirine ring and if they are feasible for them.
- I wrote three opinion pieces about PrEP access in universities which were both published on Spotlight and by other media sources such the health Systems Trust, Desmond Tutu HIV foundation and the Medical Brief to name a few.
- I guest edited a joint publication for SECTION27 and Treatment Action Campaign called Spotlight, which was a youth edition looking at their sexual and reproductive health rights.
- I supported students with their HIV prevention campaigns by offering them material and further equipped them with information before going for media interviews.
- I participated in an in-depth interview for the Empower study conducted by the WRHI
- I facilitated a session at the African Conference for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, which focused on young women and HIV prevention particularly PrEP

Key achievements

Some of the successes were not directly linked to my efforts alone. Many other advocates in my circles and beyond have been advocating for access to PrEP for young women including those in higher education institutions. The PrEP Technical Working Group had already discussed the prospects of rolling out PrEP in some higher education institutions in order to reach more young people. Today 9 Higher Education institutions nationally are rolling out PrEP.

Through my project I managed to ignite students' interest in HIV prevention activism. I have been working with a group of students from various higher education institutions in EThekweni and Johannesburg district. Some of those students started taking PrEP after attending the Youth Dialogue on HIV prevention. Others went on local, campus radio and

television stations such as VOW FM, Rise FM and Daily Thetha creating awareness about PrEP to other young people who follow these stations. I managed to encourage some students to take PrEP. One of the students was interviewed by Spotlight and the Mail & Guardian based on her experiences as a young woman taking PrEP. Her interviews were published on World AIDs Day. The students have been continuing with the HIV prevention advocacy and motivating fellow young people to get tested and consider taking PrEP.

During the fellowship year, I was afforded an opportunity to be a guest editor for a SECTION27 and Treatment Action Campaign publication called Spotlight. This issue was more focused on young people and their limited access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). This publication touches on various issues that affect young people and their enjoyment of the SRH rights. Lack of access to PrEP for young women is another violation of these rights.

My future work

I am fortunate to be employed in an organization that has been involved in profound and meaningful advocacy for the rights of vulnerable populations including people living with HIV. HIV prevention is no exception. SECTION27 recognizes the importance to continue advocating for access to women controlled HIV prevention tools and PrEP is one of them. This project has been incorporated in the SECTION27's SRHR plan as it fits well within the mandate of the organization.

Challenges and how they were overcome

Every project has its own short falls, mine was no exception. I did encounter a number of challenges these include the list below:

- One of the first challenges I encountered was the inability to manage my previous work and my project. It was easier to work on things that I was already familiar with. However, that was soon resolved through the employment of an additional person to take over my old role.
- Personal issues can derail you from your work. But good support makes the load a lot lighter.

Lessons learnt

The key lesson that I learnt was the importance of working in partnerships. It is wise to connect to fellow alumni, experienced activists, clinical researchers and AVAC partners and involve them in the planning and implementation of the project.

Fear and doubt are inevitable at the beginning, it is important to step out of your comfort zone and confront your fears.

Recomendations

- It is important to let the passion drive you
- It is important to maintain relationships with your allies
- Importance of good supervision and support

List of publications

- Developed a list of frequently asked questions about PrEP
- Op-Eds:
 1. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-08-07-op-ed-transgender-sex-workers-when-the-system-denies-them-equality-and-power/#.WzZW8tgzbEY>
 2. <https://www.spotlightnsp.co.za/2018/04/26/failing-young-women-south-africa/>
 3. <http://www.hst.org.za/publications/HST%20Bulletins/HST%20Bulletin%2026%20January%202018.pdf>
 4. <https://www.spotlightnsp.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/spotlight-5-30mar-singles-WEB.pdf>
 5. <http://bhekisisa.org/article/2017-12-01-00-young-fabulous-at-risk-how-sa-is-preping-young-women-for-the-hiv-prevention-pill>

