



IHVN NEWS

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My Greatest Joy is when children are HIV Free – Mentor Mother

by Blessing Ukpabi and Luret Dakum



Comfort Owemimi counseling a client at General Hospital Karshi, Abuja.

Comfort O. had a bumpy journey to hope and health after discovering her HIV positive status in an ante-natal clinic in 2008. However, with the intervention of the HIV program implemented by Institute of Human Virology, Nigeria (IHVN) with financial support from PEPFAR through US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), she is now living a healthy life with two HIV free children.

She is determined to assist for other pregnant women living with HIV to easily benefit from the free prevention of mother-to-child - transmission of HIV services. The IHVN mentor mother model is

helping her to live out this dream. When Comfort walked into a health facility for antenatal services 14 years ago, she did not know her HIV status until the test result came out positive.

"I felt very sad, I wanted to kill myself. I did not know that there were other people living with HIV. I was depressed.

I did not let anyone know about my status, not even my husband," she says.

She tried to adhere to the HIV medication and the pockets of counsel she received from health care workers at the hospital but doing this alone was not successful because she

had to hide her medications from even her family.

"I was going through pains, there was nobody to share my problem with. I tried my best to keep my baby safe but she was HIV positive and had to be admitted. In the hospital, while seeking the attention of a nurse, she accused me of infecting my child with HIV in the presence of many people in the hospital ward. I lost hope and planned to commit suicide. I walked into the road in front of the hospital praying for a vehicle to hit me. I shed tears. Luckily, no vehicle passed by at that time. I summoned courage and went to another hospital," she says.

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From the Chief Executive Officer

Women are indispensable contributors to health in the family and society at large. Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) provides varying services to women in health



facilities and communities. This includes the provision of mentor mother services to guide women through accessing prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV services for safe mothers and babies. There is also cervical cancer screening services for women living with HIV of child bearing age, care and support services amongst others. This issue features reports on these areas as well as our programs which provides prevention, care, treatment, and research on infectious and non-infectious diseases in Nigeria.

Happy Reading!

Yours faithfully,
Dr. Patrick Dike
Chief Executive Officer,
Institute of Human Virology, Nigeria

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My Greatest Joy is when children are HIV Free - Mentor Mother

Comfort lost her baby at six months.

She found help and support when she became pregnant again in 2011. She received prevention of mother-to-child transmission services in an IHVN supported hospital.

"When I registered for antenatal at General Hospital Karshi, they welcomed me, counseled me, and told me what to do at every step. The matron here counseled me to join the mother-to-mother support group. I saw other pregnant and nursing mothers. They guided me on how to take my medications through my pregnancy, delivery and even in taking care of my baby."

It is this support and kindness that Comfort is extending to others as a mentor mother in the same hospital where she had received care.

"I don't want other women to go through what I went through with the baby I lost in 2009. I counsel women using myself as an example. I now have two HIV free children after receiving prevention of mother-to-child transmission services, I disclosed my status to my husband and I have his support in attending to my medications. I tell pregnant

women that they should adhere to medications to keep their babies HIV free," she says. She also guides them on the tests to do for themselves and for their babies and when to do these tests. She encourages them to exclusively breastfeed their babies for one year. Comfort says she remains grateful for the free medications she receives, her HIV free children as well as the knowledge she has gained as a mentor mother.

"As a mentor mother, I make sure that pregnant women and their children are healthy. I start my work from when a woman comes to the antenatal clinic and gets tested for HIV. If the test result is positive, I guide them to make sure they enroll for prevention of mother-to-child transmission services," she explains. Comfort mentors pregnant women living with HIV till their children are two years old. She follows up with them to remind them of hospital appointments. Sometimes, she even visits them in their homes.

"My greatest joy is when children are HIV free and the mothers are healthy. I am happy to see those who contemplated committing

suicide like me looking well, smiling. I don't want the women I have mentored and the women I am currently mentoring to go through what I went through. I don't want any HIV positive child to be born in this hospital. I feel like my work as a mentor mother is service to humanity and to God. That is what motivates me to do this work," she says. In General Hospital Karshi and other IHVN supported facilities in the Federal Capital Territory, Nasarawa, Katsina and Rivers state, 5,258 women accessed PMTCT services between September 2021 and October 2022. "All of the women who enrolled in the PMTCT program had HIV free children." IHVN Senior Program Officer, Prevention Care and Treatment, Dr Victoria Igbinomwanhia says. "The Institute supports about 280 facilities with PMTCT services and 150 mentor mothers in four states to guide pregnant women through the journey from pregnancy to delivery of HIV free babies. "The mentor mother model has helped many HIV positive pregnant women to adhere to medications and remain in treatment resulting to HIV free babies," she says.

IHVN Begins HIV Prevention Program among PWID

By Luret Dakum

According to UNAIDS, 10% of new HIV infections globally are from injecting drug use. To prevent blood-borne diseases of HIV and Hepatitis B and C among people who inject drugs (PWID), Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) has begun implementation of harm reduction program in 23 Local Government Areas in Rivers State. The program is funded by the Global Fund National Aligned HIV/AIDS initiative (NAHI) through FHI 360.

IHVN Program Manager Prevention, Mrs Comfort Ochigbo said that the Institute provides HIV, tuberculosis and hepatitis testing, linkage to HIV medications, pre-exposure and

post-exposure prophylaxis and gender-based violence services.

"We work with Diadem Consults Initiative and Global Health Initiative for Health and Right (GIHR) to carry out behavioural change counseling, needle and syringe distribution and drug overdose prevention services.

We have provided HIV prevention services to 5,442 individuals from October to December, 2022," she said. Mrs Ochigbo added that

"In Nigeria, People who Inject Drugs contribute 32% to new HIV infections. HIV infections

among them has increased from 3.4% in 2014 to 11% in 2020. Providing HIV prevention and treatment services to them is therefore important in curbing the spread of HIV in the country," she said.

She added that IHVN with support from FHI 360 will continue to work with communities of PWID to promote safe use, managed use, withdrawal, and abstinence from drug use.



Needle distribution Oota Community in Rivers State, Nigeria

Maternal health is not just a women's issue

In commemoration of International Women's Day, Dr Charity Maina, Co-Principal Investigator and Project Manager for Ensuring Quality Access and Learning for Mothers and their Newborns in crisis affected context (EQUAL) Nigeria Project speaks about how gender impacts maternal, neonatal health with EQUAL International's Alicia Adler.

You have had a diverse career path working as a nurse and midwife, in social work, and for the Ministry of Education leading health trainings. What led you to a career focused on women's health?

When I was growing up, we had a neighbor who was a nurse and I admired everything about her – including her uniform! She came and spoke at my primary school about becoming a nurse or a midwife and the benefits of working in that profession. I was only 11 and yet I knew I wanted to be just like her. After secondary school I became a nurse and soon after a midwife and I really enjoyed it – having this woman as a role model got me started and my passion for helping others kept me going and growing. Most of the work I've done – professionally and personally through volunteer work with my church and the community – has focused on improving health for women and adolescent girls, especially around their sexual and reproductive health. I spent a lot of time working on HIV education and awareness, adolescent awareness of menstruation, and now on maternal health with inclusion of pregnant Women With Disabilities – “Leaving No One Behind.” These are areas often silenced and stigmatized and I knew there was a lot of good I could do.

Why is it so important to have women working in science and research especially when studying topics related to women's health (including MNH)?

Sexual Reproductive Health Research is usually considered sensitive and personal, so women often prefer to go to a health worker of the same gender. This is even more the case in northern Nigeria where gender norms are more strict. I think the same is true for research. When studying maternal and newborn health for example, I think it makes a big difference to have women leading the work because we can relate to the topics and experiences. That makes other women feel more comfortable and more likely to share openly and honestly. For example, I personally had a breech birth, so I know what it is like when talking about complications during pregnancy and childbirth. I think that also makes me a better researcher because my personal experiences drive my passion to find ways to prevent these types of complications for others.

Midwives can provide more than 80% of the essential care needed for women and their newborn babies. Despite this, there is a severe shortage of midwives around the world including in Nigeria where there are only six midwives for every 10,000 people. Recognizing that women account for 90% of midwives globally, how does gender inequality impact midwifery in Nigeria?

Yes, like in other countries, midwifery in Nigeria is mostly women. Despite our ability as midwives to deliver the majority of MNH care, our work is undervalued. But because midwifery is made up of mostly women, the problem starts with education. Nigeria is a very dynamic country and things vary drastically not only between the different states but also between individual families in the same areas. My dad was the Commissioner for Education and my mother was a teacher so education was always a priority in my family – my father and mother were always pushing me to think about my future. Unfortunately, that isn't the case for many young girls in Nigeria who don't have the money or encouragement to get an education and the support to find a career they are passionate about. Things are more difficult in the northern part of the country where early and forced marriages are common and lead to school dropouts. With so many adolescent females not getting an education, it is difficult to recruit midwives. I think these women and young girls need the type of mentorship and role models that I had.

Beyond the biological differences, gender roles, norms and behavior have an influence on how women and girls access health services and how health systems respond to their different needs. How do you gender dynamics, biases, and inequality impact maternal health access and outcomes in Nigeria?

We really can't generalize because the answer varies depending on the region and the different cultural and religious practices. As I mentioned, in



EQUAL Project Manager, Dr Charity Maina, collecting data in FCT School of Midwifery, Gwagwalada using the *kobo* software as part of a pilot study.

areas in the north, we see more early and forced marriage, poor education, and poverty. In these places, women are often voiceless and cannot make informed decisions about their own health – men make the decisions like if/when she goes to a health center and sometimes they even control what type of care she can receive – for example some adult women have to obtain permission from their husbands to get an HIV test. This is a contributing factor for why so many women give birth at home. I remember a time when I went to conduct a training at a hospital and there was a woman experiencing an obstructed labor. Even though the woman was of legal age for consent, the nurse felt the need to wait for her husband to give the consent before he could perform a c-section. All of this has been made worse in the northern states impacted by the conflict and a double tragedy for women living with disabilities. Over the years, we've seen health and education systems disrupted making it even more difficult for women to get an education and access good quality maternal care.

For International Women's Day – March 8, 2023 – what is your call to action to help improve maternal health outcomes for women across Nigeria?

Every year, we celebrate international women's day and it's a call for action to empower women and see more equity. It's also an important time to remember that maternal health is not just a women's issue. It is something everyone in Nigeria should care about and prioritize. Imagine a Gender Equal World. Collectively we can all #EmbraceEquity.

Culled out from <https://equalresearch.org/blog/womensday2023>

IHVN trains health workers on hand hygiene *By Luret Dakum*

To prevent the spread of infections in the Federal Capital Territory and Nasarawa State, the Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) has trained health care workers from 30 health facilities on hand hygiene.

The three-day training, was organized by the IHVN Strengthening Global Health Security Agenda in Nigeria (SECURE-Nigeria) Project. It had Antiretroviral Treatment Clinic Coordinators and Managers as well as Infection Prevention Control (IPC) Focal Persons in attendance.

IHVN SECURE Project Director, Mrs. Rita Okonkwo said that "In the last two years, we supported health facilities with an IPC program in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The objective is to screen patients and health care workers for respiratory pathogens. We are expanding the program to include hand hygiene implementation. This training is to strengthen their knowledge and ability to implement and monitor compliance to hand hygiene implementation. Hand hygiene compliance is key to prevent hospital-based infections," she said.

The training included elements of WHO recommendation for different modes of IPC interventions as well as quality improvement

methods to support behavioral change.

Participants also developed a facility work plan of activities for hand hygiene implementation.

Training Participant, Pharm. Timothy Anejo, described the training as invaluable.

Mr Anejo who is the (IPC) Secretary at Bwari General

Hospital, Abuja said that he has picked ideas to improve the practices in his facility.

"I have learnt a lot and shared ideas.

Handwashing has been overlooked so it is important that we get these reminders from time to time and

how it affects not just the health workers but the public." Another IPC Focal Person, Lafia, Comfort Suchet, from Dalhatu Araf Specialist Hospital(DASH), that the training has



Training participants during a group session



IHVN SECURE Project Director, Mrs. Rita Okonkwo making a presentation on hand hygiene.

changed her orientation on hand hygiene. "There were things that I over looked but in the cause of this training I learned five critical techniques which I will be stepping down to my colleagues."

Spotlight on Adolescent Peer Educators

By Damilola Olufowote

Nem Abraham is one of the adolescent peer educators trained by Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) to provide support to adolescents who access HIV care and treatment. He shares his experience as a peer educator. He has served as a peer educator for two years.

As an adolescent, I know that we like our privacy. At the point where an adolescent's HIV status is disclosed to them, I try to calm the patient down and let them know that

HIV is not a death sentence.

I talk to them about the importance of adhering to their medications to reduce the virus in their bodies to lead to viral suppression.

When I notice that an adolescent's viral load is high, I take the adolescent to an Enhanced Adherence Counselor (EAC) to counsel them on the importance of adherence.



Nem Abraham

I use the educational materials given to us by IHVN to educate my clients.

I take this work as my quota to making the world a better place. My word of encouragement to people out there is that HIV is not a death sentence.

JAN - MARCH 2023

PHOTO GALLERY

Compiled by: Tong'ret Lot and Damilola Olufowote



HIV Testing at Jikwoyi, Abuja to mark World AIDS Day, 2022



Esu Jikwoyi, Rev. Dr. Bawa S. Jetta, outreach organizers and community members at the outreach to mark World AIDS Day, 2023



IHVN staff participated in the Federation of International Development Agencies Football (FIDAF) which featured non-governmental organizations in Abuja. IHVN won trophies in football, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, scrabble, chess and relay.



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IHVN staff participate in a workshop on practical media and website content management.



Senior Research Officer at International Research Center of Excellence (IRCE) Dr. James Onyemata leads visiting researchers from San Raffaele Scientific Institute, Italy, on a tour of laboratories at the IHVN campus.

Institute Screens 25,000 Women for Cervical Cancer

By Blessing Ukpabi

The Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) has screened 25,175 women living with HIV for cervical cancer from 2020 to 2022 and treated more than 700 women with pre-cancerous lesions. IHVN Chief Executive Officer, Dr Patrick Dakum, stated this at a sensitization program to mark World Cancer Day held at the Institute in Abuja.

Dr Dakum, who was represented by the IHVN Director Prevention, Care and Treatment, Dr Helen Omuh said that, “about 40 to 50% of the over 374,000 people living with HIV supported by the Institute are women between 25 and 49 years who have a six-fold risk of developing cervical cancer.”

She added that the Institute is committed to ensuring that individuals and communities have equitable access to quality care and treatment.

“IHVN will continue to contribute towards

closing the care gap for cancer prevention and treatment in Nigeria,” she said.

Two mothers living with HIV who have benefitted from the cervical cancer screening program, said that they were informed about the screening in the hospitals where they access care.

Both 41 year old Blessing John (pseudonym) and Grace O who access HIV care at National Hospital Abuja and Primary Health Center Kuje respectively, said that the free cervical cancer screening provided by IHVN was a relief.

“The first time I heard about cervical cancer screening I was unable to do it because of the cost but when IHVN started carrying out cervical cancer screening, I was able to get screened. When I hesitated because I was afraid, I was counseled before and after the



IHVN Senior Program Officer Prevention, Care and treatment Mrs. Helen Mutong conducting Counseling Session to recruit a Client for Cervical Cancer Screening at General Hospital, Karshi.

screening,” Blessing said. Both Blessing and Grace are now advocates for cervical cancer screening. They participated in the “Close the Care Gap” sensitization program organized by the International Research Center of Excellence (IRCE) at IHVN to commemorate World Cancer Day. At the event, presentations were made by experts on cancer advocacy, clinical care, community engagement and nutrition.

Volunteer Comb Communities for Tuberculosis(TB)

Contd from Page &

By Nkechi Chinedu-Asogwa and Blessing Ukpabi

She also conducts house-to-house visits and makes regular phone calls to follow-up on her clients. One of her clients, Mrs Ajasa Cecelia, affirms that Mrs Tawakalitu's persistence in following up with her made her to start and adhere to her treatment regimen.

Though I was coughing, I did not know that it was serious till mama (the community volunteer) came to check on me and gave me a sputum cup to cough into. When the test returned positive for tuberculosis, she kept following up with me to go to the hospital. I usually go to church after work, so it was hard for her to meet me at home. One day, she checked up on me for up to six times. When my neighbours told me about her frequent visits, I went to see here and we went to the hospital together,” Mrs Ajasa says. She adds that she also received support from the volunteer when she almost stopped treatment because of the side effect of weakness that she experienced when she started tuberculosis treatment.

Mrs Ajasa has completed her tuberculosis treatment and is feeling healthy.

U S A I D T B - L O N 3

Community Mobilization

Advisor, Dr Abiola Alege

says that so far, 34,678

students have been

screened, with 102

students diagnosed with

tuberculosis. They have

been linked to treatment

through community

services provided by the

USAID TB-LON 3 project. “The thrust of the

project is to find missing tuberculosis cases.

Given our poor health seeking behaviour, just

a few people who are ill go to the hospital. If

we are to find the missing tuberculosis cases,

we have to go to the community. Our

community volunteers use the WHO certified



Community Volunteer, Mrs Olayiwola Tawakalitu counseling, Mrs Ajasa Cecelia

four-symptom screening rule to ask questions in the community about Tuberculosis in the community. These symptoms are; current cough, fever, weight loss and night sweats. The volunteers are the foot soldiers who ask probing questions to find tuberculosis cases,” she adds.

Early Cancer Screening Can Save Lives - IRCE Coordinator

By Blessing Ukpabi & Tongret Lot

The Coordinator of the International Research Center of Excellence (IRCE) at the Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN), Dr Elima Jedy-Agba, has encouraged individuals who are less than 40 years with a family history of cancer to begin screening for cancer early.

Dr Jedy-Agba stated this at an awareness and sensitization program held at the IHVN Campus to mark World Cancer Day 2023.

"In Nigeria, there is no nationwide screening. With regards to age, the guidelines say that screening for breast cancer should be from age 40 but people with a family history of cancer should begin screening earlier," she said. She also called for more funding for cancer screening in the country.

"Cancer vaccination particularly, Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccination for cervical cancer, will help prevent cancers that are preventable.

People who are screened can identify if there is cancer early and treat it," she said.

The IRCE Coordinator added that the country should also pay attention to cancer surveillance, early detection, prompt diagnosis, access to affordable treatment and research as well as capacity building to



Screening on Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) for males 40 years and above in progress at the test and screening exercise organized in partnership with Medicaid Radio-Diagnostics to commemorate the World Cancer Day 2023.

close the care gap for cancer in Nigeria.

"IHVN as an organization has a cervical cancer screening program for people living with HIV. We started conducting research on HIV associated cancers like cervical cancer, non-hodgkins lymphoma, Kaposi sarcoma and gradually extended our work to include breast cancer and prostate cancer, which are

common cancers in Nigeria. We have also worked to develop a network of cancer registries that give us accurate information about cancer in Nigeria," Dr Jedy Agba said. Also at the event, President of the Nigerian Cancer Society (NCS), Dr Adama Umar, said that individuals and communities should come together to break down barriers to fighting cancers. "We have achieved a lot in the last decade in cancer care and control around the world but not addressing inequities in society is slowing our progress. Closing the care gap is about fairness, dignity, and fundamental rights," he said. The 2023 theme for World Cancer Day is "Close the Care Gap." The sensitization and cancer screening program was organized by IHVN/IRCE in collaboration with Medicaid Cancer Foundation and the NCS. Stakeholders including researchers, and health care workers from Clinton Health Access Initiative, Ekiti Cancer Registry and University of Abuja Teaching Hospital were in attendance.

IHVN Identifies over 1900 TB/HIV Co-infections through Targeted Screening Activities

By Blessing Ukpabi

The Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) has identified more than 1,900 individuals co-infected with tuberculosis and HIV through targeted screening at antenatal clinics, pediatric emergency units, malnutrition clinics, and tuberculosis DOT Clinics.

IHVN Senior Program Manager, Dr. Victoria Adejo, said that between October 2021 and September 2022, 1,956 individuals co-infected with TB/HIV were screened at hospital service delivery points, and HIV testing provided for all clients with presumptive and diagnosed tuberculosis.

She stated that "Increased tuberculosis case finding was due to improved quality of screening accompanied with referral services by volunteers. The volunteers track clients with TB/HIV co-infection who default their medications and link them back to care; they send constant reminders to

clients, follow up with parents/ caregivers of children and adolescents and ensure that treatment is completed. Targeted screening and these volunteer activities improved



Tuberculosis screening in progress in Lafia, Nassarawa State.

adherence to TB medicines leading to good treatment outcomes and healthy children. 99% of the individuals identified have been placed on treatment for HIV and tuberculosis," According to her the Institute also sensitized communities in Katsina, Nasarawa, Rivers States, and the Federal Capital Territory.

"In Katsina state, we currently identify more than 500 tuberculosis cases monthly in collaboration with the State TB program. We have clustered the state into zones and are creating awareness about tuberculosis prevention and treatment in communities, motor parks, traditional wrestling grounds, and brothels using their native language," she said.

Rukayat Tijani, one of the mothers whose son was screened for tuberculosis at Dalhatu Araf Specialist Teaching Hospital (DASH), said that "they received me well (at the hospital), then asked me to go for a test to diagnose what was wrong with my child. I did and discovered that he has tuberculosis. With treatment, he is better now."

Dr. Adejo said that the Institute would continue to adopt innovative strategies to find and treat HIV/tuberculosis in the country.

Volunteer Comb Communities for Tuberculosis (TB)

By Nkechi Chinedu-Asogwa and Blessing Ukpabi



Mr Wasiu Sekom, a tuberculosis survivor

In April 2022, 57-year-old Mr Sekom Wasiu had been coughing for a year. He was tired of the cough but uncertain about what steps to take. He had lost a lot of weight and looked frail. One morning, after coughing all night, he sat wearily in his outdoor hut facing the road, and coughing. His assistance came from Community Volunteer with the USAID Tuberculosis Local Organizations Network (TB-LON 3) project. The Community Volunteer, Ms Elizabeth Amos, was carrying out her routine community visits to sensitize and screen for tuberculosis when she met Mr Sekom. "She advised me to go to General Hospital Badagry for a tuberculosis test. If I had not gone to the hospital at that time, I would have died. I used to cough so loud in the night that by morning, my neighbours would come and advise me to go to the hospital. None of my children could stay in the room with me. In fact, I suspected my wife of poisoning me or that someone had charmed me. I kept planning to go to the Cotonou, in Benin Republic for treatment, but I did not have the money," Mr Wasiu says. After the counsel by the community volunteer, he went for a free tuberculosis test at General Hospital Badagry, Lagos State.

When he was confirmed as having tuberculosis, he began treatment immediately. Elizabeth is still part of his treatment journey. Wasiu calls her whenever he has questions about his treatment. She also calls to counsel him on adherence as well as to urge him to go for hospital visits. Elizabeth still visits him regularly. She is one of the 230 volunteers trained by the USAID TB-LON 3 project in Lagos State. The TB-LON 3 project is being implemented by Institute of Human Virology Nigeria in Lagos, Ogun, Osun and Oyo states in South-West Nigeria. Elizabeth provides support for 22 children, 12 adolescents and 12 adults. Her clients live in Seme, Ibereko, Atan and Imeke areas of Badagry.

who have tuberculosis to link them up with screening and treatment.

"I am particularly concerned about children who have tuberculosis. I treat them like my siblings. Some of their parents feel so helpless and even cry when they discover that their children are infected with tuberculosis," she says.

12-year-old Joseph Kuton is one of Elizabeth's clients who has been diagnosed with drug-resistant tuberculosis treatment regimen. His mother receives hands-on mentoring to give Joseph the necessary support.

Before, Joseph was very thin. He could not play football like he used to. I was afraid but Elizabeth has guided us through his treatment. I am happy," Mrs Kuton says.



Community Volunteer Elizabeth Amos and her client, Mr. Joseph Koton

Other services she renders to children includes, taking them in groups of three or four to Infectious Diseases Hospital in Ojo, Lagos State for monthly routine checks. Ms Amos also participates in school screening outreaches and traces contacts of people

Another Community Volunteer, Mrs Olayiwola Tawakalitu, advocates for Tuberculosis Screening in Community Schools.

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