Introduction

• 7 million people in South Africa are living with HIV (UNAIDS)
• Prevalence and incidence of HIV vary significantly in different provinces & districts
• Analyzed HIV data collected from 4-year study of new mothers in Zithulele

Objective

The objective of my project was to analyze the trends of HIV prevalence and incidence among mothers in Zithulele, as well as analyze patterns in family planning, ARV coverage, and mother-to-child transmission, in order to provide insights into the state of the HIV epidemic at a local level that would be relevant to the research & clinical teams at Zithulele.

Work profile

• Philani conducts research & runs programs to improve maternal and child health in Zithulele
• My role: write code to organize, process, and analyze data from 4-year cohort study of 471 new mothers
• Data analysis → useful insights for Philani and Zithulele hospital

Reflection

• Researchers are very busy! I could help by analyzing data that they had collected, but had not had time to synthesize yet.
• Working with the rest of the research team, I gained an appreciation for how complicated it is to conduct public health research on the ground.
• I learned how important it is to understand the cultural context and complex social dynamics when trying to understand and respond to a public health epidemic like HIV.
• I was inspired by my colleagues working at Philani, the hospital, and surrounding NGOs due to the compassion, collaboration, selflessness, and dedication they exhibited in working to serve the community around them.
• I gained a first-hand understanding of some of the challenges of conducting research and practicing medicine in a Third-World context.
• I learned about South Africa’s history and culture, and sought to understand how these impacted the current state of disease and healthcare in the country.
• A view of Zithulele Village (and the Indian Ocean) from my research office

Looking ahead

The combination of public health research and clinical shadowing I did in Zithulele strengthened my desire to pursue a career in medicine while also piquing my interest in working at the systems-level of healthcare to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals all over the world.

Questions

The discovery of ARVs was a major pharmacological breakthrough in the fight against HIV. Are there other breakthroughs, perhaps from fields such as sociology or healthcare infrastructure, that we can find to quell the epidemic once and for all?

Conclusion

There will never be a silver bullet to the health problems of the developing world, but the existence of individuals as dedicated, talented, and compassionate as those I met in Zithulele provides inspiration in the pursuit of improving the health and wellbeing of those most in need.

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