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Dr. Harrieth Ndumwa & Castory Munishi



Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) and HuruApp developers

"People do not believe that substance use is a health condition, so they don't know it can be treated." - Dr. Harrieth P Ndumwa

How would you describe the situation in Tanzania regarding substance use and youth?

Harrieth:

The trends for substance use are still going up in Tanzania. The patterns are changing, particularly in one of the North-Eastern regions of Tanzania, Tanga, where we conducted a recent survey on substance use. A significant number of individuals are using drugs at household levels instead of streets or in hidden places, making it easy for not only adolescents but also young children to engage in substance use.

Castory:

From the survey we conducted in Tanga Tanzania, we found that about 4% (19/481) of the study participants had started using drugs when they were younger than 15 years, and about 60% (287/481) started using drugs when they were between 15 to 24 years. We are therefore convinced that initiatives like 'Listen First' can be of much help, particularly if they are well

promoted in schools.

What are your plans for 'Listen First' in Tanzania?

Castory:

First, we are translating 'The Science of Care' materials into Kiswahili and posting them in this new app we have developed, the [HuruApp](#). We also intend to create Kiswahili posters and put them up in secondary schools located in Tanga. And later, we will post the videos in the app and share them with the groups we created during this larger campaign we implemented with NGO Casa Famiglia Rosetta (ACFR) and UNODC last year.

As a digital health researcher, how can materials like 'Listen First' be useful?

Harrieth:

The 'Listen First' materials can guide parents on how to raise their children better, and protect them from engaging in risky behaviors, such as substance use. For a bigger impact, the 'Listen First' materials should also reach parents who play a vital role in children's upbringing. This can be done through platforms such as parent-teacher meetings. We should go further to make parents understand these concepts and apply them to raise their children and their families in general.

Castory:

'Listen First' provides foundational information on how to take care of your children so they can have a sense of belonging. This kind of caring can help children grow in a safe environment, and that will protect them from influences resulting in substance use. During our research, we noticed a poor connection between parents and their children. So then, when they go to school and are exposed to peer pressure, they might use substances because their families do not know what their children are doing. But if they have this basic information that 'Listen First' promotes, it can help them take better care of their children. Sitting together as a family and asking them how they're doing can impact a child's upbringing so they can know what is good and what is harmful.

What is the HuruApp?

Castory:

The HuruApp is a web and mobile-based application that has been designed to provide evidence-based information to people with substance use disorders and their families on different aspects of drugs, their effects, and available treatment options.

Harrieth:

We're looking forward to further integrating more features that will be useful for people with substance use disorders and their families, particularly in helping them recover and access services.

How can a digital app like this make a difference?

Harrieth:

People do not believe that substance use is a health condition, so they don't know it can be treated. So one of the reasons that we believe this app is so important is, firstly, it gives the message that substance use disorder is a health condition that can be treated. And then it provides this next step, where can treatment be provided? We believe that in the long run, this app will be instrumental in helping reduce the burden of substance use disorders, particularly in our setting.

Castory:

This app has both English and Kiswahili languages and is specifically dedicated to information regarding substance use and how to recover. So this is a big opportunity because people can access the information they've never had access to before. And it has brought forward a new way of utilizing technology in promoting treatment services for people with substance use disorders and their family members to avoid stigma. Many think that substance use is a personal failure, that they have lost direction in life, so there is a lot of stigma around this.

The HuruApp and 'Listen First' translations have been part of a larger project that you have done with the UNODC. What can you tell us about this?

Harrieth:

It was a two-year project focusing on rehabilitation in the local community, implemented with an Italian NGO, Association Casa Famiglia Rosetta (ACFR) in collaboration with the Tanzanian Ministry of Health (MoH), the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) and the Drug Control and Enforcement Authority (DCEA).

Before the campaign, we conducted two studies to assess the situation and what needed to be done. We then designed the campaign based on these findings. The goal was to bridge the gap between the number of people with substance use disorder and the number of people seeking treatment by advocating for treatment that is based on scientific evidence, human rights, and voluntary participation. Community awareness campaigns were conducted directly in the streets, religious centers, and schools and through media such as televisions, radio, and the HuruApp, which was designed to complement the physical activities of the campaign, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we held a stakeholder meeting to disseminate our findings. One outcome of this meeting is that they promised to add another center for opioid treatment (methadone) because of the magnitude of substance use in Tanga (and the influx of people with substance use disorders seeking treatment as a result of the campaign). So that's one of the great successes of this project.

Towards the end, we translated UNODC's 'The Science of Care' materials into Kiswahili which has been posted in the HuruApp and will be distributed in the form of posters in the Tanga Region's secondary schools. The project's relevance has also been highlighted by the International Society of Substance Use Professionals (ISSUP), which voted it among the top 6 finalists for the 'ISSUP Evidence-Based Drug Demand Reduction Initiative Award 2022'.

Dr. Harrieth P Ndumwa is a scientist holding a Medical Degree from the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) and currently working as a Research Fellow at the directorate of research and publications, MUHAS. She has conducted research on mental health and drug use, HIV-AIDs, COVID-19, Anti-Microbial Resistance, Non-Communicable Diseases as well as digital health. Recently, she has won two research grants from the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (RSTMH) and the Laerdal Foundation. She has also coordinated two collaborative research projects between MUHAS and the University of Oxford. Prior to this, she coordinated a collaborative implementational research project under the Association Casa Famiglia Rosetta (ACFR)-Italy as an implementing partner of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Castory Munishi has a Bachelor's degree in Pharmacy from Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS). He is an aspiring global health scientist with a particular interest in combating Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as mental health, substance use, hypertension, and diabetes. He is passionate about using digital technologies to address health care challenges. Castory has held more than ten leadership positions, volunteered, and assisted in more than 40 impactful projects.

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