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Wits and UKZN Researchers Launch Free Resource for Health Providers to Manage HIV in Africa

Millions of people are now living with – rather than dying from -- HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa due to combination drug therapies. But the vast majority struggle to manage the many disabilities caused by this disease and its treatment. Today, researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and their partners in Zambia, Kenya, and Canada launched a free [website](#) to help health workers improve the quality of life of adults and children living with HIV throughout Africa.

“New health sector responses are needed to support the millions of people in South Africa and throughout the continent who are now able to access treatment and live long-term with HIV,” said Saul Cobbing, a physiotherapy lecturer at UKZN who co-authored the tool. “Rehabilitation is a crucial component that is not yet integrated into the health response. People are planning their futures and rehabilitation can help reach the goals that matter to them.”

HIV can cause disease in every part of the body. Because it targets the immune system, infections and other diseases are a constant threat. Techniques like chest physiotherapy, for example, help people with lung infections breathe effectively. The neurological system is a target for HIV damage, leading to strokes, spinal cord infections and nerve damage in legs. These problems require rehabilitation to help people walk, swallow, live independently, and support themselves and their families.

The medications that allow people to live with HIV can cause problems to the heart, lungs and liver. People living long-term on HIV treatments can also experience bone death in their hips and knees. Rehabilitation helps people address the impact of these conditions on their daily lives. For example, physiotherapists help to manage pain and increase function and mobility. Occupational therapists devise “workarounds” and other ways for people achieve their goals. And speech therapists help people learn to swallow and talk after brain injury. Rehabilitation also addresses the profound stigma related to both HIV and to disability.

Today, growing numbers of the 24 million people living with HIV throughout Africa have access to treatment. But there are few rehabilitation resources to help people live well with HIV. This international team, including Saul Cobbing and Verusia Chetty at UKZN, and Joanne Potterton and Hellen Myezwa at Wits, are working to strengthen rehabilitation in the context of HIV across the region.

“Integrating rehabilitation into HIV clinical care and health policy is the next crucial step for our response to the pandemic in Africa,” said Dr. Esther Munalula Nkandu, senior lecturer at the University of Zambia and Africa Regional Representative for the World Confederation for Physical Therapy.

The free website, entitled “*How Rehabilitation Can Help People Living with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Evidence-Informed Tool for Rehab Providers*”, was adapted from a [Canadian resource](#) and is also downloadable for use on paper.

“It’s designed to be a one-stop resource for physiotherapists, occupational therapists and other health workers who can quickly and easily research the most common HIV-related disabilities, and find evidence-based rehabilitation solutions”, says project lead Dr. Stephanie Nixon, who is Director of the University of Toronto’s International Centre for Disability and Rehabilitation ([ICDR](#)) and co-founder of the [Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation](#).

This innovation was funded by [Grand Challenges Canada](#). Grand Challenges Canada is funded by the Government of Canada and is dedicated to supporting Bold Ideas with Big Impact in global health.

For more information about the website, please [visit](#) University of Toronto’s Department of Physical Therapy.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

Verusia Chetty
Lecturer, Physiotherapy
School of Health Sciences
University of KwaZulu Natal
Durban, South Africa
+27 748905279
chettyve@ukzn.ac.za

Heidi Singer
Communications and Media Relations Specialist
Faculty of Medicine
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada
+1-416-978-5811
Heidi.Singer@utoronto.ca