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The HIV prevention cascade: more smoke than thunder?

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

The need for a call to action for HIV prevention is clear. The UNAIDS global estimates of the burden of HIV released on May 31, 2016, show continuing extraordinary progress in rolling out antiretroviral therapy to people living with HIV. Around 17 million of the 36·7 million people living with HIV are now accessing treatment leading to substantial reductions in mortality. By contrast, despite the steady rise in the proportion of people living with HIV on treatment, the number of new infections among adults has remained stubbornly high, with a modest 4% fall in east and southern Africa over the past 5 years, and an alarming increase of over 50% in eastern Europe and central Asia. So the HIV Prevention 2020 Framework, laid out in this issue by the Global Prevention Focal Point Group is welcome.

The 90-90-90 target set by UNAIDS in 2014 and subsequently incorporated into the planning of many countries has been a major advocacy success in pushing governments and programmes to respond to the clear evidence that all people should be offered treatment. The target consists of three sequentially linked goals that, if achieved, would lead to 73% of individuals living with HIV being effectively treated so that their virus was suppressed. This is good for people living with HIV and also renders them no longer infectious. Such a simple, clear strategy to find as many people living with HIV as possible, to treat as many of them as possible, and to ensure that the treatment is as effective as possible lends itself well to monitoring through an approach known as cascade analysis.

Two of the papers in this issue are based around the concept of the HIV Prevention cascade and another uses prevention cascades for each of several interventions. The cascade presented is from demand to supply to adherence, which is a useful framework for analysing bottlenecks and programmatic ways to improve outcomes. The cascade approach makes perfect sense when considering a set of (public health) actions that are consequent one upon another. This approach was probably first popularised in the Piot model proposed by Maurice Piot at WHO in the 1960s to describe the likely effect of tuberculosis control programmes and the importance of each of the transitions from symptoms through health-seeking behaviour to accurate diagnosis and effective treatment. Similar models have been used for sexually transmitted infections (the Piot-Fransen model, no relation to Maurice) and malaria. However, HIV prevention, with the exception of preventing mothers living with HIV from passing infection to their infant, does not lend itself to the same linear processes making the cascade concept harder to define, to explain, and to measure. Every one of the 37 million people living with HIV needs essentially the same thing (diagnosis, linkage to care, the offer of treatment and support to maintain viral suppression). Both the denominator and the numerator for each step in the cascade are intuitive and (at least in principle) measureable. However the prevention needs of the approximately 4 billion sexually active adults who are currently uninfected are highly varied and dependent on local context and individual behaviour. Recent advances in HIV prevention have aimed to expand the range of effective approaches and to promote individuals’ autonomy and choice. The notion of combination prevention, emphasises the same multisectoral view described by Hargreaves and colleagues linking prevention to structural, behavioural, and biomedical interventions. Although
the HIV prevention cascade is described as being “similar to the HIV treatment cascade”, we are also advised to avoid confusion because “our use of the term cascade is different to the HIV treatment cascade” and not to “oversimplify HIV prevention”.18 Within a single key population, there is, of course, enormous heterogeneity, and by implication, there are different prevention needs.14 Even the value of a condom to prevent HIV is entirely as keeping girls in school for more years, can lead to shoehorn prevention frameworks into a linear model.

As Garnett and colleagues19 point out, “each intervention can be separated out”. In the new era of the sustainable development goals, the emphasis is on integration and universal coverage. Attempting to measure the drop out along the process of each component of a prevention approach may be a strong way to improve performance but may not be the best overarching framework for prevention. The management framework and the core results for HIV Prevention by 20202 make prevention cascades just one element of quality improvement.

When David Livingstone stumbled upon the largest cascade in Africa, he learned that it was called Mosi-oa-tunya, the smoke that thunders. It would be a shame if the power of cascade analysis was hidden by attempts to shoehorn prevention frameworks into a linear model.

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I declare no competing interests.

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