

## Exploring Barriers to Utilization of Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) Services and Post-Natal Antiretroviral Treatment (ART) among HIV-Positive Women in Ho Chi Minh City

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**Project Description:** This 12-month study is exploring barriers to utilization of prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) services at a large obstetrics hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, as well as successful referral of HIV+ women for post-natal antiretroviral treatment (ART) that is available at separate clinical sites. In 2004, Vietnam was selected as the only Asian country to receive PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) funding. Implementation of PMTCT, a priority of the national ART program, has begun at four pilot sites in Ho Chi Minh City. However, recent data and compelling anecdotal evidence suggest that HIV+ women may face difficulties when accessing these programs. Stigmatization of persons with HIV/AIDS may be a major obstacle as AIDS in Vietnam is widely associated with the "social evils" of drug use and prostitution. Research before the availability of ART suggests that health providers may segregate or refuse to treat HIV+ women, and may not describe medical options, and that women with HIV may avoid accessing health care for fear of disclosure of HIV status.

CAPS and the Ho Chi Minh City Provincial AIDS Committee are currently conducting a clinical study of an early infant HIV diagnostic strategy. The proposed study addresses obstacles to care faced by women in this parent study, as well as women not enrolled in the parent study. Subjects are HIV+ pre- and post-natal women and their health providers, as well as other key informants such as AIDS advocates and family members of women with HIV. Through key informant interviews and focus groups of women with HIV and public health personnel, we are exploring utilization of PMTCT; related behaviors and attitudes of health providers; and referral to post-natal ART clinics. Findings will be used to design an intervention trial to enhance utilization of PMTCT and ART services in the context of a family-centered HIV care and treatment program.

**Significance:** Stigmatization of HIV is strong in Vietnam, as summarized by UNAIDS Deputy Executive Director Kathleen Cravero in 2004, "I've visited over 50 countries and the problem of stigma and discrimination is as great or greater in Vietnam than in any country I've visited." With the widespread introduction of antiretrovirals in 2005, barriers such as stigma, which may prevent access to care, must be addressed.

**Project Recruitment Dates:** September 2005 – February 2006

**Project End Date:** August 2006