Benefits of electronic data collection for HIV test counseling

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Rapid HIV Testing in California

In the State of California, all HIV test counselors in public-funded testing sites must be certified through a five-day test counselor training. This training is run through the AIDS Health Project.

In that training, counselors are taught that for rapid testing, there is a rough timeline that should be followed. The focus is on providing client-centered counseling and health education as needed, within the time parameters of the OralQuick Advance Rapid HIV-1/2 Antibody Test.

Counselors must also complete a detailed risk assessment form with the client, instead of directly conversing with them about their risk factors. The chart below shows the 16 sessions from Magnet, as labeled in the training model above.

The CIF is intended to capture a detailed version of the HIV risk history and other demographic information for every person who is tested for HIV at publicly-funded sites in California. Counselors are expected to complete this form for every session, which often means spending much of the 20-minute session completing the form with the client, instead of directly conversing with them about their situation and current needs given their impending test result.

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Data collection with PalmPal

PalmPal is a new format that collects CIF data electronically from the client before the test session begins. PalmPal was created through a collaboration with Magnet, the San Francisco Department of Public Health, and the UCSF Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (PAFT Study).

The goal was to see what impact there would be on the session if the requirement that counselors collect data for the CIF were eliminated. The State-required data are collected instead via a self-administered survey on a touchscreen computer, while the client is in the waiting room prior to the start of the test.

Data are transmitted directly to local and state databases. The counselor does not see the information that the client enters into PalmPal, in order to encourage honesty and increase privacy.

Counselor reaction

Counselors like PalmPal, too.

Three months after implementation, a forum was held with the volunteer HIV test counselors to see how things had changed since PalmPal began. There were a few things they said:

1. "I guess I feel I don’t have as complete of a picture of this client’s life. And it’s more up to me, if I need to read a complete picture, I have to figure out what questions to ask. But overall, it gives me space to just shape the session however I see appropriate."

2. "I like this a lot…in the counseling session, what’s going on is a conversation. Establishing the rapport and finding out what’s going on with them and then following up with some facts is what’s important. Does it really make a difference whether the guy had 2 or 3 partners? No – it matters what he does."

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But how does it really change counseling?

More recordings have been done at Magnet with the same counselors as in the first phase of the study. Those sessions were then once again coded according to the four categories defined earlier and plotted along a timeline. The results clearly show there is an impact on the session when using PalmPal. Most interestingly, removing the CIF from the session has significantly reduced the gap between the “ideal” test session, as modeled in the training, and the reality of rapid HIV test counseling sessions at Magnet.

Below is an example of the change in counseling seen in one counselor after PalmPal was implemented. Note how similar his “Aft-” sessions are to the “ideal” timeline if you remove the yellow bars.