If I’m not in the club, I have to move from one chair to another."
A qualitative evaluation of patient experiences of adherence clubs
In Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, South Africa

Emilie Venables, 1,2 Catriona Towriss, 3,4 Zanele Rini, 4,8 Xoliswa Nxiba, 5,6 Suhair Solomon, 5,6
Tali Cassidy, 5,6 Anna Grimsrud, 1,3 Landon Myer, 1,3 Lynne Wilkinson

1 MSF Southern Africa Medical Unit, Cape Town, South Africa, 2 Division of Social and Behavioural Sciences, School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, 3 Centre for Actuarial Research, Faculty of Commerce, University of Cape Town, 4 Centre for Infectious Disease Epidemiology Research, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town, 5 MSF, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa, 6 Division of Public Health Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town

Background
Quantitative outcomes of ART adherence clubs have been well described both for pilot and scaled implementation in South Africa, but to date there has been no qualitative evaluation of the model of care from the perspective of patients.

Adherence clubs are made of 15-30 ART patients who meet five times a year either at a facility or at a venue in their local community. Pre-packed ART is distributed to club members by a lay health-care worker. Patients must meet certain clinician-assessed criteria which classifies them as ‘stable’ in order to join a club. They are referred-out of clubs to clinician-led facility-based ‘routine’ care if they miss appointments by more than 5 days, experience virological rebound or become clinically unstable requiring more regular clinical follow-up.

We explored perceptions of clubs amongst members and non-members in two sites in Cape Town, South Africa.

Methods
- A qualitative study was conducted in 2015-2016 in Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, two high HIV prevalence communities in peri-urban South Africa
- 11 focus group discussions with 85 participants who were all current club members
- 43 individual in-depth interviews with eligible patients who had never joined a club and club members who had been returned to routine care.
- Interviews and FGDs were conducted in isiXhosa by a local research assistant
- Audio-recordings were transcribed and translated into English
- Transcripts were entered into NVivo and coded
- Thematic analysis was used. Codes explored people’s perceptions and experiences of clubs, including benefits and challenges of membership.

You become interested to be in the club through hearing people say that in the club people do not take long; you get there, take your pills and get a date to come back. Even people who work there as counsellors tell us that anyone who misses a date will be taken out: that encourages us to know our date so that you are not taken out.

If you can stay away for a month, that means you don’t care about your life. That shows that you don’t care because you cannot make the mistake of going back to the clinic whilst already in the club. It means you don’t care if you allow yourself to go back to (the clinic) while you are in the club.

I took my medication the way they told me to, but I was given this one pill instead. When they looked at my older (they noticed that the one who changed me didn’t write down) that she had changed me to this one pill in my folder. Everything showed that I was still on the old medication. They said it’s them who gave me wrong medication and that’s why I had to go back to (routine care). I felt very bad. I even wanted to quit my medication.

Conclusions
- The club model was considered acceptable by patients, including those who were no longer in clubs. The flexibility around ART refill collections offered to members was particularly valued.
- Stronger eligibility and enrolment follow-up is required from clinicians during consultations.
- Improved patient understanding of the following model components is essential to build relationships with health-care workers and trust in the overall health-care system:
  - criteria for club eligibility and referral out;
  - the value of increased clinical oversight given upon referral out.
- Further research should determine in which circumstances club removal is warranted, compared with increased adherence or clinical management within or alongside continued AC membership.

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