Psycosocial Status of HIV Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) Paediatric Populations in Sub-Saharan Africa: Case of Eldoret Municipality, Kenya

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Abstract: Acquired Immuno-deficiency syndrome (AIDS) has devastated population in Sub-Saharan African leaving many children orphaned. The Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) occasioned by death of one or both parents through HIV are exposed to challenges in life that may affect their psychosocial status. Although data on the extent of HIV/AIDS on paediatric population is well known, the psychosocial status of the children are rather obscured that hinder plan of assistance to help these children cope with trauma. This study assessed psychosocial status of the HIV positive children in Eldoret Municipality, in Kenya. It was conducted through survey design and targeted 384 OVC and 214 guardians. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and interviews. Personal problems experienced by the children included depression, trauma, stress, seclusion and grief, leading to overall low levels of psychosocial status in children. It is recommended that a comprehensive update on the issues that bring psychological trauma, stress and depression such as discrimination of the children should be addressed by HIV therapists and other healthcare practitioners working with HIV-infected persons through regular anti-discriminatory campaigns and provides a chance to treat such children to reduce situations that cause psychosocial problem.

Keywords: Orphaned and Vulnerable children (OVCs), HIV/AIDS, Psychosocial status, Eldoret Municipality

1. Introduction

Since it was diagnosed in the 1981, the magnitude of the HIV pandemic has been the most devastating in modern human history [1]. By the year 2010, UNAIDS estimated that up to 2.2 million children under the age of 15 years were living with HIV/AIDS and up to 22 million children under the age of 15 having lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS [2]. The world’s hardest-hit region, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has just over 10% of the world’s population, but is home to more than 70% of all children living with HIV and more than 85% of all children under 15 living with the disease [3]. Between 1990 and 2009, SSA population of children orphaned by AIDS increased from less than 1 million to more than 12 million [4]. In Kenya, by the year 2003, indicate that there are up to 1.2 million orphaned children without any parent due to HIV death [5].

Children infected and affected by HIV have similar needs as every other child, except that the fulfilment of these needs is potentially in jeopardy since they lack either or both parents. Lack of either or both parents can bring about a range of psychosocial challenges to the affected children. This may lead to children feeling deprived of their childhood, causing misery and sometimes thoughts of suicide. Children of the HIV deceased parents may be at risk due to the social isolation associated with HIV resulting in both physical mental, spiritual, economic and psychological effects due to the prevailing conditions [6]. Therefore, the need to address the long-term needs of paediatric HIV orphaned children stems from recognition of the psychosocial challenges facing this population. Although literature on children and HIV is extensive, as is the literature on HIV related stigma, the specific research on HIV/AIDS-related psychosocial status among OVC are relatively sparse. Therefore this study determined the psychosocial status of HIV OVCs paediatric populations in SSA using a case of Eldoret Municipality in Kenya.

2. Research design and Methodology

Study area, population and sample

This study was conducted in Eldoret Municipality in Kenya (34°50’E to 37°30’ East and 0°03’ to 0°55’S). The area has moderate levels of HIV infections ranging between 2.5 to 4% of the National HIV infection rates, but recent trends indicate that HIV/AIDS levels may be marginally on the increase [7]. This study adopted a cross sectional survey design. A sample size of 384 children, was determined based on calculations using [8]. The children were sampled from the homesteads at random. From the homesteads, the guardians were also sampled to get their views about the children. We sampled 174 guardians in charge of the 384 children. During the study, the inclusion criteria used were: HIV children aged 11-19 years. The exclusion criteria in this study were: orphaned children who were critically ill. The socio-demographic data for the OVCs and guardians is shown in Table 1.
Data collection instruments and scoring

The researcher used questionnaires and interviews as the main tools for data collection. There were two types of questionnaires used for the purpose of this study: the orphan questionnaires and the guardian questionnaires. The orphan questionnaire was researcher administered and the contents of the questionnaires were explained in the most simplistic way to the orphan. Guardian questionnaires were used to gather information from the guardians of the children and often involved explanation of the content of the questionnaires to the respondents. The researcher also used interview schedule (based on the content of the questionnaires) to compliment the questionnaire in getting first hand information and reduce ambiguity in responses, for the HIV orphaned children and guardians. The respondents who could not adequately fill the questionnaires were also interviewed. Validity of the instruments was determined through solicited expert opinions. Instrument reliability was determined as described in [9].

In the questionnaires the marked items were scored to obtain the levels of each variable being studied. The scoring of items determining the psychosocial status was based on the Likert score of five items for the orphan and the guardians. In the scoring the orphan questionnaire and guardian questionnaire, 14 items were used. The items would yield a minimum of 14 if all the questions were marked 1 while a maximum of 70 would be obtained if all the responses are marked 5. Since all the questions were in the negative, the psychosocial status of the OVCs were projected (as Low, neutral and high), the scores were interpreted as follows: 14 to 39.5 represented low psychosocial status, 39.6 to 44.6 represented neutral and 44.5 to 70 represented high psychosocial status. In order to obtain the rank scores when computing the nature of psychosocial problems, the following formula was applied. %Rank score = A/B

Where: A = Overall calculated score for all respondents and B = Number of respondents*Maximum possible score (5).

Piloting: The researcher undertook a pilot study to standardize the data collection methodologies by anticipating the types of response expected from the field. A total of 8 orphans and their guardians were sampled in each of the piloted areas. The pilot was more specifically carried out: to test the questionnaires which were used in the study, to get an impression of the problems of the orphaned and vulnerable children in the research area and to help identify problems during the study and which may not be seen during the planning stage.

Ethical issues: The major ethical issues addressed were: informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, anonymity and researcher’s responsibility. In this study, the researcher verbally informed the participants on the purpose of the research and asked them to sign a consent form before providing the questionnaires outlining the purpose of the study. All the participants signed the form. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the information given.
A written consent was shown to the participants. All participants remained anonymous. Authorization to conduct the research was granted by the Institute of Research and Ethical Committee (IREC).

3. Study findings and discussion

Information on the nature of psychosocial problems faced by the OVCs based on their responses is provided in Table 2. The results presented in the table indicate that all the OVCs suffered immeasurable psychosocial problems. However, the problems suffered most by the OVCs were: trauma, stress, misery and grief which had a rank scored of over 82%. These concur with other studies [10-13]. It has been noted that depression, anxiety, stigma, stressful and traumatic life events occur in epidemic proportions in HIV-infected affected paediatric populations [14], which according to UNAIDS, continue to increase in the HIV pediatric population. In cases of stigma, children begin to be rejected early as their parents fall ill with AIDS [15]. Some children may be teased because their parents have AIDS, while others may lose their friends because it is assumed that proximity can spread the virus [6] leading to trauma and depression or seclusion among these children. This can also add to the feelings of anger, sadness, and hopelessness that was observed for some of the children in the study area. One study in Kenya found that most of the children orphaned by AIDS had no one outside of their families to talk to leading to severe cases of depression and seclusion [16], which might have added more psychological problems to the OVCs [17].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychosocial problems by the OVCs</th>
<th>All the time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>% Rank scores</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is painful to loose the parents (trauma)</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling that the world is coming to an end (stress)</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure about the future (misery)</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes to mourn (grief)</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of deep thought (stress)</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of loneliness (seclusion)</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid other children (seclusion)</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am annoyed with what killed my parent (misery)</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear many people including other children</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can bring back the parents (hopelessness)</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encounter a lot of nightmares (trauma)</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling like you don't want to play (seclusion)</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling like I don't want to live (suicide feelings)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling sad (depression)</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to obtain the rank scores when computing the nature of psychosocial problems, the following formula was applied. % Rank score = A/B

Where: A = Overall calculated score for all respondents and B = Number of respondents*Maximum possible score (5)

The nature of psychosocial problems based on the guardians is provided in Table 3. The most important among them were found to be trauma, followed by depression, unhappiness associated with grief, unhappiness and finally lack of confidence, which all scored a % rank scores of over 80%. On the other hand other psychosocial challenges that were prevalent among the OVCs as espoused by their guardian but in low proportion were: loss of weight perhaps due to lack of appetite or too many emotional thoughts, traumatic experiences of nightmares and loss of appetite which all scored a rank of below 70%. This indicates that there was a high prevalence of stress, depression, trauma, grief or misery associated with HIV orphanhood, which may aggravate cases of psychological problems.
In order to obtain the rank scores when computing the nature of psychosocial problems, the following formula was applied. % Rank score = A/B

Where: A = Overall calculated score for all respondents and B = Number of respondents*Maximum possible score (5)

The psychosocial problems highlighted by the OVCs and guardians were then scored. The levels of psychosocial problems by the OVCs obtained as presented in Fig. 1. The results based on the results of the two respondents indicate that the psychosocial status among the OVCs was low based on the OVCs response (84.1%) and the guardians responses (81.9%), which may be attributed to the above discussed problems faced by the children. These psychosocial factors (e.g. depression, trauma and coping with stress) have consistent and clinically relevant influences on children development; the effects of psychosocial factors may be mediated biologically through changes in the sympathetic nervous system; “stress hormones” and the immune system, as well as behaviourally through changes in such behaviours as traumatic adjustment syndrome [18].

4. Conclusions and recommendations

There were several psychosocial problems among the OVCs in Eldoret Municipality but the most common ones were depression, trauma, stress, seclusion and grief. It was also concluded that there was low level of psychosocial status of the HIV/AIDS associated OVCs in Eldoret Municipality. Based on the above finding, a comprehensive update on the issues that bring psychological trauma, stress and depression such as discrimination of the children should be addressed by HIV therapists and other healthcare practitioners working with HIV-infected persons through regular anti-discriminatory campaigns and provide a chance to treat such children to reduce situations that cause psychosocial problems.
References


Author Profiles

Mary W. Chege has Masters of Public Health from Moi University, Eldoret. She has extensive knowledge in pediatric psychology spanning over 10 years working with orphaned children at Moi teaching and Referral Hospital, Eldoret. The current study was part of her Master’s Thesis titled “Challenges faced by the HIV children on their psychosocial status in Kapsaret and Kesses Divisions – Eldoret municipality, Kenya”.

Prof. Akon’ga is the current director, School of Social and Cultural Development Studies, Moi University. He is an astounding researcher in social sciences and psychology with several papers in refereed journals.

Dr. Elijah Oyoo-Okoth graduated with A PhD in aquatic Ecology and Ecotoxicology from the University of Amsterdam in 2012. During the PhD, he studied paediatric epidemiology and nutrition and developed interest to learn more about paediatrics psychology. He has authored several papers in health-related problems to the paediatric population in Sub Saharan Africa.