

# HIV Voluntary Counseling and Testing Services

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A Guideline for Service Providers

07/01/2010

Prof. Mervat El-Gueneidy

Dr. Tarek Bahaa



## COMPONENTS OF HIV/AIDS

### VOLUNTARY COUNSELING AND TESTING SERVICES:

#### *Voluntary counseling and testing (VCT):*

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This is a preventing service representing the link between prevention of HIV infection and care of people affected with HIV.

This service helps the client to understand the experience of HIV testing, the choices he has to make and the different supportive services that could help him. This service usually entails two sessions, a pretest session and a posttest session. The counseling session focuses on of HIV infection, AIDS and testing and positive change of behavior.

VCT services include:

- Pretest counseling
- Testing for those who accept the test without coercion and full confidentiality
- Post test counseling
- Follow up counseling when needed
- Referral to appropriate services

#### **Counseling:**

It is an interactive process to help the individual to take an informed decision to undertake HIV testing and change risky behaviors.

The main purpose of this process is to support of the individual in handling the stresses associated with testing and providing the needed emotional support

**Voluntary testing:**

This is the procedure followed to diagnose HIV infection for those who are willing to undergo the test without any coercion and with their own free choice.

**Anonymous testing:**

This is an HIV testing using a special code to recognize the blood sample without asking the client for his name or any sign that would connect the sample to the client. It is impossible to recognize who the client is except through the client himself.

**Confidential testing:**

It is a form of HIV testing where the client and any information related to him is known only to the counselor and no one else.

**Informed consent:**

It is the agreement of the client to undergo HIV testing after having full information about HIV/AIDS, consequences of testing meaning of results and the consequences of undergoing testing and its results

**Referral:**

It is a process whereby the client goes to the appropriate place to receive the service, care and support needed. The counselor should facilitate this process by making appointments, providing transportations, giving address, etc.

In case of referral the client has to know that he will have to give his name, yet confidentiality is assured.

***Referral services include:***

- Couple counseling
- Mental health services
- Support group

- Antenatal care
- Drug rehabilitation centers
- STI clinics
- Medical care services

### COUNSELING OVERVIEW

#### **What is counseling:**

Counseling: is a confidential dialogue between a person in need (client) and another trained to fulfill this need (counselor). Counseling could be defined as an interaction to help client help himself.

In relation to HIV/AIDS counseling aims to help the individual take an appropriate decision about being tested and personal decisions related to HIV infection and AIDS. It also aims to provide psychosocial support and help in problem solving.

#### **Counseling is not:**

A conversation to exchange information and opinions, is not an interrogation or a confession, it is not a means to display counselor's knowledge

### OBJECTIVES OF VOLUNTARY COUNSELING AND TESTING SERVICES

1. Provide essential and correct information about modes of transmission of HIV and means of prevention of infection
2. Help clients to assess their risk of infection and take informed decision about testing
3. Psychosocial support for client to help him accept test results and deal with its consequences
4. Help clients to minimize their personal risks and others risk to HIV infection.

## THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE COUNSELING PROCESS

1. The client can take decision for himself
2. The client is the only one who can resolve his problem
3. Advice is not the way to help an adult to change his behavior and avoid infection

## TYPES OF HIV TESTING

1. **Voluntary HIV counseling and testing:** Client-initiated HIV testing which is always associated with pre and post test counseling session , there are two types of voluntary HIV testing:
  - a. Anonymous
  - b. Confidential
2. **Diagnostic HIV testing:** This is performed whenever a person shows signs or symptoms that are consistent with HIV-related disease or AIDS (e.g. TB clinics and fever hospitals)
3. **Provider-initiated testing and counseling (PITC):** Here the health care professional is the one asking client to perform the test like in ANC clinics
4. **Mandatory HIV screening:** in case of blood transfusion.

Pre test counseling session should be provided to anyone irrelevant to the type of HIV testing and informed consent should be ensured.

## BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE PROVISION OF VCT SERVICES

VCT site should be easily accessible to everyone and should ensure privacy and confidentiality with no signs of stigma and/or discrimination. The site should also be of good quality of lighting, ventilation and means of comfort. VCT site is composed of four basic partitions as follows:

	Partition	Basic requirements
1	Reception	Office - Computer - Phone - Fax - Printer - filing cabinet – registry file – IEC materials - data collection forms
2	Waiting room	Waiting Chairs - TV (display) - Video (monitor) - posters, brochures and educational materials
3	Counseling room	Office – counselor chair – client and partner chairs - data collection forms – male and female condoms- demo
4	laboratory	Rapid test kits – fridge – centrifuge – other lab instruments and infection control measures- injection and vacutainers .

## HUMAN AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES FOR VCT CENTERS

1. **Counselor:** is a person trained on counseling skills in the field of HIV/AIDS chosen from persons working in the health field (doctors, nurses, lab technicians, sanitarians) or from those working in psychosocial field ( social worker, psychologist ). He has the personal qualities necessary for this job (empathy, feeling for others, acceptance, patience, ability to talk in sensitive issues)
2. **Coordinator:** is selected from health workers or psychosocial workers and has computer skills and personal. Human relation like courtesy, qualities of comity, decency and welcoming people. He has to be trained on data processing and analysis.
3. **Lab technician:** well-trained on different HIV testing techniques and means of following up on testing kits and necessary testing equipments. He has to be able to ensure quality of testing and to relate to a client.
4. **Center director:** responsible for supervision of all center services and functions for ensuring quality of services and follow up of ethical considerations. He is also responsible of M&E of all center activities.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATION OF VCT SERVICES

All those working in VCT services should abide with the following VCT principles:

### **Informed consent:**

Client should be informed about and understand all issues related to HIV/AIDS and testing and its consequences. He has to agree on being tested

### **Confidentiality and anonymity:**

Counseling and testing are provided in private sessions without asking name and identity of a client. Confidentiality should be ensured for all clients. This principle entails refusing to discuss HIV testing results or trying to trace client to whom the result belong.

The client should agree before testing to be known in case of a referral from anonymous services to another service ensuring confidentiality.

**Non malevolence:**

The counselor should never hurt the client verbally or by action at any time.

**Benevolence:**

The client's benefit should always be the objective of the counseling session and not the benefit of the counselor or the center

**Autonomy:**

Any decision should be always that of the client without any pressure or coercion. The client is responsible of his life for making a decision and solving a problem with some help from the counselor. The counselor should never impose his opinion or give solution during counseling sessions.

**Partner notification:**

The counselor should help the client to notify his/her sexual partner (wife, husband) of positive test result. It is preferable to motivate the client to inform his/her partner. The counselor should not take this responsibility except after failure of all other avenues.

**Age consent:**

Anonymous VCT is provided to any client aged 16 years and above based on his informed consent and parental consent is not required at this age. Sometimes it is necessary to provide confidential HIV testing for minors. This includes the following:

- Children with suspected clinical indications of HIV/AIDS.
- Children at increased risk of HIV infection (street children, children who engage in prostitution or injecting drug use and/or other high risk groups).
- Sexually abused children.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF COUNSELOR-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

### **Professional relationship:**

Ensuring a professional type of relationship with the client is the responsibility of the counselor. The objective of this relation is talking about what is important for the client and meeting his needs. The relationship can turn easily into a social relation if the counselor talks about his about himself or try to meet his personal needs during the relationships.

### **Time:**

Ample time should be provided for the client. Counseling cannot be provided, in a hurry. The time should allow for the development of a helping relationship.

### **Acceptance:**

It is essential that the client feels accepted during counseling session. This will enable him to be open and honest. The counselor should avoid criticizing clients' behavior or judging their values. In order to accept clients' emotions and reactions the counselor should appreciate the emotional stresses and the fears of being infected and stresses associated with behavior and life change to which the client is subjected. The counselor can display acceptance of clients' anger, sadness and/or fear by direct expressions e.g. "your feelings are very strong, I can understand it and accept you with it".

### **Trust:**

This is one of the important elements of counselor-client relationship. It strengthens the relation and enhances client acceptance of information given during counseling. Correct and complete information helps developing trust.

**Privacy and confidentiality:**

VCT client needs privacy and confidentiality to feel secure. Accordingly the counselor should:

- Provide appropriate place for counseling session
- Understand that he should not disclose any information related to the client except upon his consent
- Utilize appropriate means of recording clients' information and ensuring confidentiality of recorded information.
- Ensure that all VCT workers understand and respect principles of confidentiality and privacy
- Explain to client any limit or bridging of confidentiality principle. Some exceptions might be related to the rules and regulations e.g. notifying governmental places or disclosing to husband or wife. These are controversy issues that should be dealt with based on the practical application of based on applications on ethical principles.

**Respect:**

Counselor should realize that his actions and feelings could express respect of the client or lack of respect. Means of showing respect include:

- Keeping appointment time and apologizing for any delay or cancelling
- Active listening and showing interest
- Showing care about client's interest
- Dealing with client as a unique and important person
- Does not assume the role of an advisor or preacher
- Help clients to take conscious decisions and support them accordingly

- Believe that clients are capable of solving their problem and controlling their own life.
- Does not judge them or their behavior.
- Express moderate friendly attitude
- Provide support and encouragement to the clients

**Honesty and sincerity:**

Counselor should be genuine and spontaneous in his relation with client. This is achieved by:

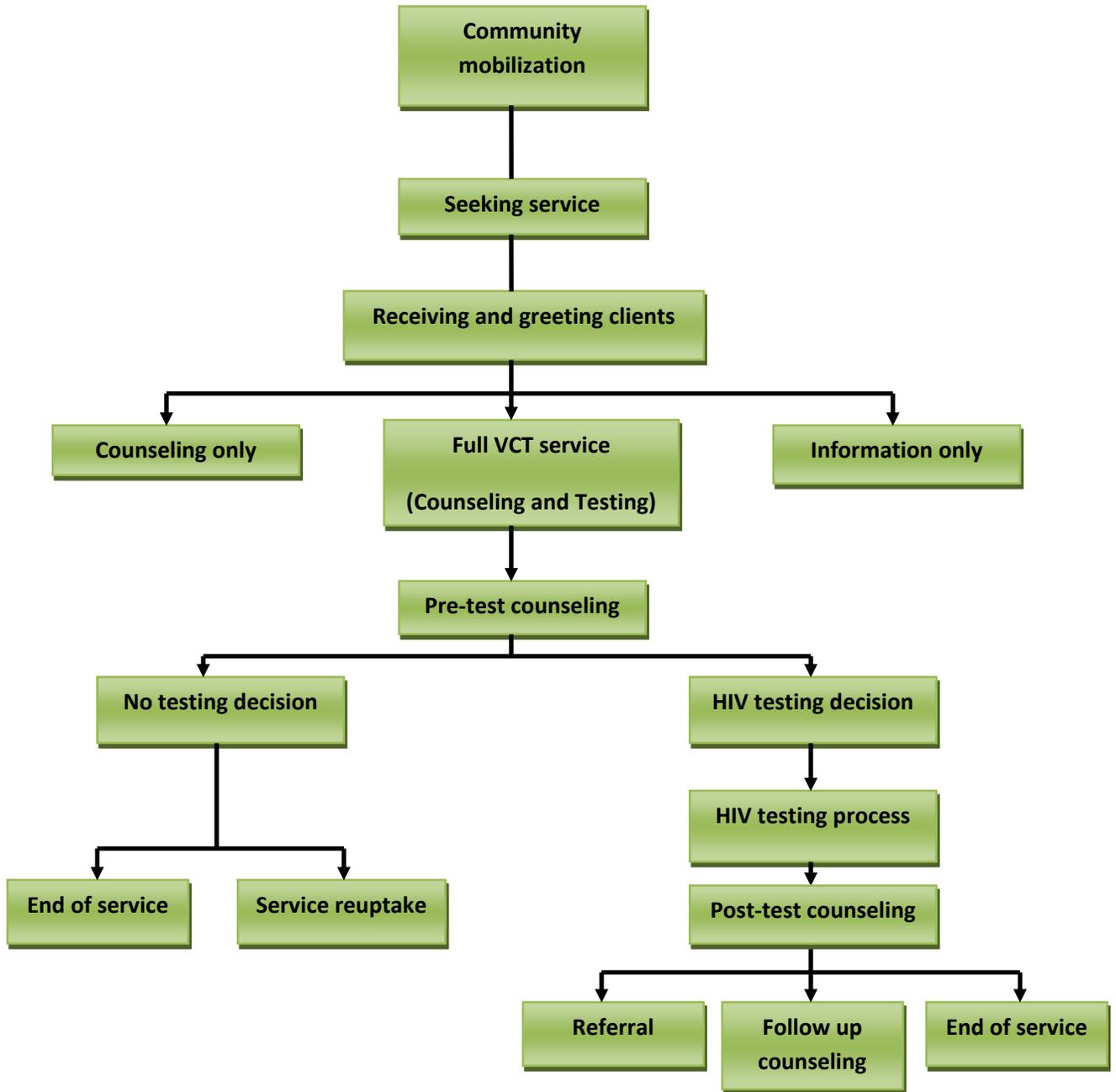
- Being sincere in performing his role
- Remaining open and non defensive
- Consistent without discrepancy between his values and behavior
- Showing desire to put himself and his experience for the sake of the client if this is important.
- Being himself without acting or playing a role

**VOLUNTARY COUNSELING AND TESTING SERVICE MODEL**

1. Community mobilization: regular announcement of VCT services is essential to attract people to this service. This can be achieved through seminars, different media campaigns, leaflets, posters, etc.
2. Receiving the client: the coordinator receives the clients, greets him and presents different available services and IEC materials. He then offers him to choose a code name.
3. Recording data: this includes client code and general information e.g. age, sex, educational level, marital status.
4. Pre-test counseling
5. Testing
6. Post-test counseling
7. Follow up counseling and/or referral



## VCT Service Model



## VOLUNTARY COUNSELING TESTING PROCESS

### ***I. Receiving clients:***

Proper receiving of clients and offering available services is the first step to ensure proper service uptake

### ***II. Client registration:***

- Each client is given a code number and chooses a code name (this name is not a personal name). This would ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the service provided.
- Client can be given a card with his code name and unique code number to be presented when he returns for his test results and for follow up. These steps should be taken to ensure anonymity of each client and that the nature of the service provided is kept confidential.

### ***III. Providing pre-test counseling:***

Pre-test counseling session is provided for every person who presents for HIV testing. This session takes about 30-40 minutes.

### Main points to be covered in a pre-test counseling

- What is AIDS? Etiology?
- Modes of HIV transmission and means of non transmission
- Meaning and importance of HIV testing
- Interpretation of test results
- Importance and meaning of window period
- Natural history of HIV infection
- Clients' reasons for testing
- Client risk assessment
- Plan for risk reduction
- Prevention of further HIV transmission for the person and his partner
- Means and importance of behavior change

- Clients' ability to understand, cope and accept HIV test results
- Discuss sources and means of support
- Demonstrate correct method of condom use
- Discuss partner notification (husband/wife)
- Provide opportunity for client to ask questions
- Obtain consent for testing
- Schedule an appointment for post-test counseling

### **Stages of pre-test counseling**

There are three interrelated stages for pre-test counseling. These include stage of rapport, stage of action or understanding needs and priorities and helping in decision making and the third stage is the ending phase of taking a decision to test or not to test or solving the problem

- Stage (1): phase of rapport

The main objective of this stage is to create a cooperative relation between the client and the service provider so as to understand the client's problems and requests. It includes:

1. Information before counseling: this is the information collected by coordinators before entering the counseling room
2. Building relationship (meeting and greeting the client): introduce self and role of the counselor, service provided and help client identify reasons for visit
3. Explain steps of counseling and testing

- Stage (2): action and understanding phase
  - i. Help client to express his knowledge and feelings about HIV/AIDS, correct misconceptions and add missing information
  - ii. Risk assessment with empathy and acceptance

- iii. Explain testing protocol, meaning of window period and steps of confirmation of results
- iv. Explain in details meaning of negative test result:
  - a. confirmed if the test has been conducted after the window period
  - b. It will not remain negative if the client continues his risk behavior
  - c. It does not denote partner HIV status
- v. Explain in details meaning of positive result
- vi. Assure accuracy of the test result
- vii. Discuss possible reactions to test result
- viii. Discuss alternatives and plan for risk reduction
- ix. Demonstrate condom use, its availability and possibility of its distribution to client
- x. Address immediate questions and concerns
- xi. Discuss client's sources of support
- xii. Discuss partner notification plan
- xiii. Identify client's decision for testing
- xiv. Obtain client's consent for testing

4. Stage (3): termination phase

After obtaining the client's consent to test or not to test end the session

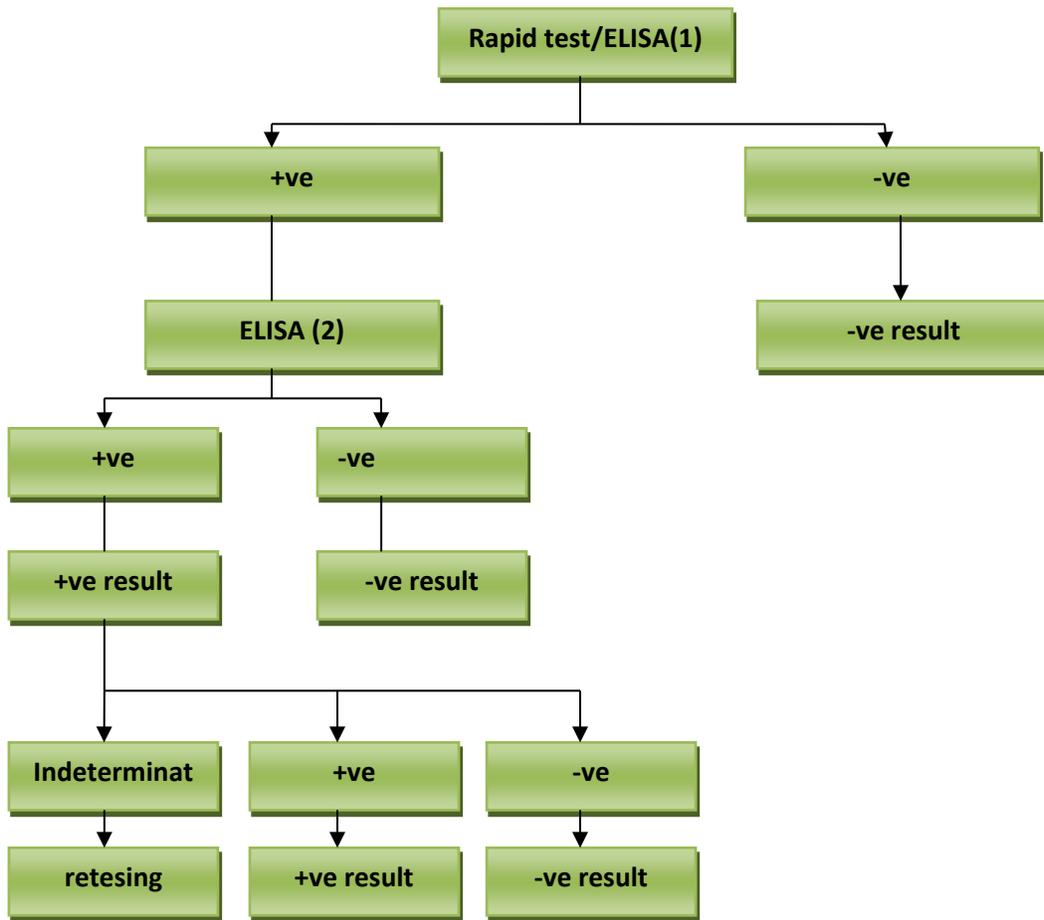
**IV. HIV testing:**

Antibody testing is used to diagnose HIV infection. For this purpose, several laboratory testing techniques e.g. ELISA, rapid tests are used. It is advised to use rapid test in VCT settings as it uses simple techniques and preliminary test results are available within 15 minutes (there are rapid test kits with high sensitivity equal to that of ELISA testing)

Testing procedures: HIV testing protocol is based on the national protocol used to confirm test results where rapid test is performed and in case of positive rapid test result, follow up testing is performed according to country protocol of HIV testing.



HIV testing protocol (after the window period)



- V. Post-test counseling: post-test counseling session is provided when giving test results is usually takes from 25-50 minutes according to client's needs and his reaction to test result. Post-test counseling should be given whether the test result is negative or positive. Points to be covered:
- Provide test result
  - Help client to react to the result and express his feelings
  - Help client to understand and cope with test result
  - Review plan for risk reduction
  - Discuss partner disclosure
  - Answer any question and respond to any concern
  - Discuss follow up plan and referral procedures

#### Protocol of post-test counseling

- I. Initiating phase:
- Assess client's readiness to receive results
  - Provide test results in an objective manner without undue positive or negative reactions e.g. "the test is negative meaning that till now you are not being infected with HIV if the test was made after the window period" or " the test is positive meaning that you have been infected"
- II. Working phase:
- Ensure the client understands what the result means
  - Give client time to express his feelings and reactions towards the test results
  - Address immediate emotional concerns
  - Express empathy and acceptance of reactions
  - Ask client about next step
  - Negotiate risk reduction plan
  - Discuss partner notification
  - Meet client needs and respond to different concerns
- III. Termination phase:
- Ask client for further questions and/or concerns
  - Make follow up appointments
  - Refer client to appropriate site
  - Ensure the capability of the client to leave the place safely

## Training curriculum for VCT counselors

VCT counselors should receive condensed training about:

- A. Basic concepts and information related to HIV/AIDS:
  - What is AIDS and its etiology
  - Modes of transmission and non transmission
  - HIV testing and meaning of different test results
  - Difference between HIV positive and AIDS patient
  - Natural history of HIV infection
  - AIDS treatment
  - Combating stigma and discrimination
  - Psychosocial reactions to HIV infection
  - Means of prevention
- B. Counseling issues:
  - Meaning and objective of counseling in relation to HIV/AIDS
  - Pre requisites of counseling
  - Types and techniques of communication
  - Counseling skills
  - Talking about sensitive issues
  - Demonstrating condom use
- C. Ethical principles of counseling
- D. Quality assurance
- E. Monitoring and evaluation services

### VCT quality assurance

Quality assurance is of a paramount importance to ensure sustainability and success of HIV testing and counseling services.

Steps for ensuring quality assurance of counseling services:

Every VCT site should make sure that the counseling services provided is of high quality, the following strategies should be implemented to ensure sustainability of this quality:

- Service provider self evaluation after each session
- Regular supervision and provision of support for counselors. Supervision may include case presentation, observing counseling session (with client consent), recording counseling session (with client session), establishment and implementation of a quality control services
- Counselors support for each other to prevent burnout

- Obtain client opinions and degree of satisfaction using client exit questionnaires or interviewing clients after completion of the service

#### Ensuring quality of testing

The following strategies should be followed in each VCT to ensure quality of testing:

- Repeating testing of all HIV positive sample to ensure positive diagnosis
- Central lab is the reference lab ensuring quality of HIV testing in all VCT units
- Application of quality control procedures on all sample daily
- Storage HIV testing kits appropriately and refrain from use after expiry date

#### **Guidelines for lab technician:**

- Greet client and explain method of blood sampling
- Take the blood sample
- Ensure that the sample is identified with the client code, according to the recorded code on HIV testing request for, let the client see for himself that sample is identified by his right code
- Make sure that an appointment has been made for the client to receive his test result
- Do not take blood sample from a new client except after terminating the recording of the present client sample
- When test result appear, record it and give it to VCT coordinator
- Report about any expired or about to expire, kits

#### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are critical components of the successful implementation of VCT services. It will help continuous and regular identification of potential problems and provide information for future designing, planning and implementation of programs

VCT M&E indicators: several indicators could be collected through forms present in VCT units. VCT team could monitor the different services provided.

Examples of indicators:

- Number of VCT attendance
- Number of pre-test counseling sessions
- Number of clients counseled and tested

- Number of HIV positive results
- Number of clients who received test results
- Number of post-test counseling sessions
- Number of clients referred to other services
- Reasons for testing among VCT clients
- Means of knowing about VCT services
- Number of IEC materials distributed
- Number of condoms given
- Number of clients intended to notify their partners

#### VCT forms

- Client register
- Client intake forms including:
  - Basic socio-demographic information
  - Client behavior and probability of risk
  - Test results and post test counseling
- HIV testing request form
- Inventory forms of IEC, condom and rapid test kits
- Referral forms
- Self assessment of counseling session

#### References:

- 1- HIV voluntary counseling and testing in Egypt, a reference guide for counselors, MOH, USAID, IMPACT, fhi, 2006.
- 2- UNAIDS/WHO Policy Statement on HIV Testing, June 2004