

HIV perceptions and coping strategies in a cohort of HIV-infected female sex workers in Burkina Faso

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Background: Traditional and spiritual health care providers may be important sources of care or comfort for many HIV-infected patients in Africa. The study shows the influence of the psychosocial factors linked to HIV infection, namely the disease representation in the coping mechanisms developed by patients.

Methods: Semi-standardized interviews were conducted with 44 HIV-infected women aged 18-45, involved in sex work in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. All women had a history of seeking care in the alternative/traditional health sectors. The study explored the coping strategies used by the patients including care-seeking from biomedical services, from traditional practitioners, from community-based organizations, and evangelical/spiritual centers.

Results: The choice of coping strategy by individual patients was related to their perception of HIV infection and the evolution of this perception. Coping strategies linked to the use of traditional healers or prayers were related to disease denial, whereas strategies based on the use of the biomedical or associative sectors were related to a greater acceptance, and objective knowledge of the infection and its evolution. Seeking care from alternative treatment centers or use of community facilities was linked to the perception of HIV. In all forms, such strategies play an adaptive role to the health condition. The integration of meaning would allow psychological/mental re-adaptation for the management of HIV infection.

Conclusions: The lack of trust from biomedical care providers towards alternative and traditional medicine does not deter patients from seeking care in those sectors. Community facilities which offer alternative care fulfill the patients' needs for a spiritual and social response to the disease. It is imperative to determine the basis of patients' coping strategies in order to provide adequate responses to their needs.

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