

Leveraging Technology to Assess Pharmacy Professionals' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices Related to HIV/STI and Potential to Improve Coverage of Key Populations in Southeast Asia

Authors: Candice Taguibao, Josselyn Neukom, Jaca Maison Lailo



Background

Pharmacies are one of the most accessible sources of health products and advice given their convenient opening hours, geographic proximity, simple walk-in procedures, and range of products stocked¹. As a result, pharmacies serve clients from a diverse range of demographic and socio-economic profiles, including key populations at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (HIV/STI). In this context, SwipeRx², the largest digital network of pharmacy professionals in Southeast Asia, was used to understand knowledge, attitudes and practices related to HIV/STI among pharmacy professionals in Viet Nam and Thailand.

Methods

In 2020, with support from USAID Linkages and USAID SHIFT, SwipeRx mobile app was used to collect cross-sectional data from pharmacy professionals in Viet Nam and Thailand related to HIV/STI knowledge, attitudes and practices. Using convenience sampling, pharmacy professionals were encouraged to complete the digital survey through in-app messaging, SMS and email. Descriptive analysis was used to analyze survey data from both countries.

Results

- Total respondents: 282 Vietnam, 268 Thailand
- # weeks required for data collection : 3.5 weeks Vietnam, 6 weeks Thailand
- % pharmacists: 59% Vietnam, 74% Thailand
- % women: 59% Vietnam, 69% Thailand
- Median age of respondents: 30 years for both Vietnam and Thailand

Insight 1: Pharmacies are an important source of HIV/STI preventive and curative products in Southeast Asia. Among an average of 139 total clients visiting pharmacies in Viet Nam each day, on average, this includes:

- 19 clients purchasing condoms daily
- 13 clients purchasing STI medication daily

Insight 2: Pharmacy professionals have general knowledge about HIV/STI but are less knowledgeable about HIV transmission, PrEP prevention and oral swab rapid HIV tests. According to 2020 SwipeRx surveys:

- 88% of pharmacy professionals sampled in Thailand and 81% in Vietnam knew that HIV is curable.
- 59% of pharmacy professionals sampled in Viet Nam and 74% in Thailand were able to correctly identify the following HIV transmission modes: vaginal/anal intercourse, mother-child transmission, sharing injecting equipment.

- 18% of respondents in Thailand and 32% in Viet Nam were aware that an oral swab HIV test exists.
- Only half of pharmacy professionals sampled (49% in Thailand and 56% in Viet Nam) were aware of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and its ability to prevent HIV infection.



Insight 3: Pharmacy staff are interested in expanding the offering of STI/HIV products and services at their pharmacy, including referral of clients for more comprehensive HIV/STI care.

- 8 in 10 reported "agree" or "strongly agree" to being willing to provide HIV rapid-tests at their pharmacy in future (83% Viet Nam, 80% Thailand).
- 85% respondents in Viet Nam reported willingness to provide PrEP at their pharmacy in future.
- 81% of respondents in Viet Nam reported interest in digitally referring clients for HIV/STI diagnosis and treatment.



Insight 4: Stigma-related attitudes may limit pharmacy professionals' ability to provide client-centered counseling for clients at risk of HIV/STI, particularly in Viet Nam.

- Only 61% of the pharmacy professionals sampled in Viet Nam compared to 79% in Thailand "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement: "I am comfortable counseling my clients about HIV."
- 29% of pharmacy professionals sampled in Viet Nam, compared to 12% in Thailand, "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement, "people with HIV brought it on themselves."



Conclusion

Digital surveys through SwipeRx can efficiently generate insights from pharmacies relevant to HIV/STI program goals in Southeast Asia. Results from two surveys deployed through SwipeRx in 2020 indicate knowledge and attitudinal barriers to HIV/STI care at the pharmacy. The surveys also indicate strong interest in offering HIV rapid tests at the pharmacy and participating in e-Referral programs in the future.

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