

A DAY IN THE LIFE: —

CERVICAL CANCER PREVENTION IN LOBATSE, BOTSWANA

SUBMITTED BY JHPIEGO

ON THE BENCHES in the central waiting area of the Tsopeng health clinic in Lobatse, a shy, soft-spoken mother of three waits to see a doctor. This morning, Kutlo Nkuetsho traveled by bus to Lobatse - a sprawling town in Botswana, encircled by hills, close to the border with South Africa - prepared to hear bad news and convinced that she had cancer.

A few years ago, Kutlo began experiencing pain. A series of visits to health care providers yielded few answers; although she received a Pap smear, she was never told the result or what she should do next, a common outcome of Pap smears in resource-limited health centers. Then, in 2016, when Kutlo was seeking family planning services, a nurse identified precancerous lesions during an exam and referred her for LEEP, the loop electrosurgical excision procedure used to remove large precancerous cervical lesions.

The Tsopeng health clinic, where Kutlo now waits anxiously, has been at the forefront of the national cervical cancer response in Botswana. In 2015, the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MOHW) launched national “see and treat” services here, with support from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon, an international nonprofit affiliated with the George W. Bush Institute. As Principal Registered Nurse at Tsopeng and District Coordinator of the National Cervical Cancer Prevention Program, Nurse Rose Dithlong recalls a time not so long ago when she lacked the simple tools and procedures to adequately screen for cervical cancer as part of prevention services. Women would come in with advanced cervical cancer, and there was little she and the clinic staff could do. “I am so hurt to see a woman coming in with cancer,” Nurse Dithlong says, her frustration palpable.

On this hot, dry day, as the clinic fills up with women wanting screening and follow-up treatment for precancerous lesions, it is apparent that things are changing. The national cervical cancer prevention strategy, which includes a “see and treat” approach to immediate care emphasizes nurse-led, frontline screening using a technique known as VIA (visual inspection with acetic acid) and same-day treatment with cryotherapy for smaller lesions, or LEEP for larger lesions. Because VIA and cryotherapy can be provided by nurses, the MOHW is scaling up this service in clinics throughout Botswana with Jhpiego’s technical expertise and through support from PEPFAR, Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon, and the CDC.

Since the launch of see and treat services, more than a dozen clinics have started offering VIA. Women like Kutlo visit the Tsopeng clinic for cervical cancer screening routinely now, referred by friends and relatives. They often ask Nurse Dithlong, “Are you telling us cervical cancer is preventable?” She assures them she has the tools to help them. “Every woman who comes here will get her results right away,” she says proudly.

Onkabetse Medupi, a young doctor from Tsabong, a small town in the Kalahari Desert west of Lobatse, echos Nurse Dithlong’s enthusiasm. He’s at Lobatse today to learn the LEEP procedure from MOHW and Jhpiego trainers. Like Nurse Dithlong, he has seen too many women whose cervical cancer was identified too late. He’s eager to take new skills back to his clinic.



Kutlo Nkuetsho, left, and Bakgaki Ratshaa, Jhpiego CECAP Technical Advisor, talk during Kutlo’s visit to the Lobatse See and Treat Clinic.

Nurse Dithlong and staff work hard to spread the word that cervical cancer is preventable. When women come in for screening, she says, “I think of my auntie, my sister, my cousin.” It motivates her to go into her community, to work with village health committees to talk about cervical cancer and what providers are doing at the Tsopeng clinic. Toward the end of the morning, the benches at the clinic slowly start to empty. Kutlo Nkuetsho is among the last patients to be seen, but she didn’t mind the wait. She walks out of the LEEP clinic profoundly relieved that her precancerous lesions have been treated. She is going home a very happy woman to tell her sister that she should be screened too.

