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Text messaging to encourage uptake of HIV testing amongst African communities: findings from a theory-based feasibility study

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Background: There is a public health need to tackle high levels of undiagnosed (or late diagnosed) HIV amongst the UK's African communities.

Aims: To assess the feasibility and acceptability of using a text messaging intervention to encourage uptake of HIV testing amongst this population in a UK city.

Methods: Participatory research adopting a mixed-methods design. Four distinct stages included:

[1] Formative Research: Six focus group discussions (FGDs) to assess perceptions about HIV and to inform message development (n=48) using health behaviour change theory.

[2] Message Development: SMS messages developed and tailored according to language, gender and religion.

[3] Intervention and outcomes: 172 participants recruited; all received 2 messages per week for 12 weeks. Data collected in pre and post questionnaire surveys assessing uptake of HIV testing, HIV-related attitudes and knowledge and perceived general health.

[4] Evaluation: Acceptability and meaningfulness of the intervention were explored via semi-structured telephone interviews (n=21).

Results: Follow up data was collected for 76 participants (44%). 8 (10.5%) reported having had an HIV test during/after the intervention. Risk perception remained low at pre and post-test. Non-significant improvements were observed in HIV-related knowledge (testing procedures and treatment availability) and attitudes towards HIV. Qualitative evaluation (n=21) showed that messages were perceived to be

highly acceptable, useful and appropriately targeted.

Conclusions: SMS text messaging is an acceptable and feasible method of promoting HIV testing in African communities. Rate of testing uptake is comparable to other community-based strategies in this population.