HIV-related stigma and psychological distress in a cohort of patients receiving anti retroviral therapy in Nigeria.

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Introduction: In 2018, Nigeria, the most populated country in Africa had the fourth largest HIV epidemic worldwide. Untreated mental health illness in persons living with HIV (PLWH) have been increasingly recognized as a barrier to engagement in HIV care services, resulting in poor medication adherence and difficulties in achieving viral suppression. Attaining the 95-95-95 by 2030 targets set by UNAIDS may not be possible without routinely identifying and addressing the mental health needs among PLWH. The objective of this study was to describe the patterns of HIV-related stigma in a cohort of patients newly initiated on ART in Nigeria and to assess the relationship between HIV-related stigma and psychological distress in their first year on ART.

Methods: An institution-based prospective cohort study was conducted at the Nigerian Institute for Medical Research. Study population consisted of patients enrolled from November 2013 to May 2014 who within 90 days of ART initiation. HIV-related stigma was assessed at enrollment using the 40-item Berger stigma scale which allowed assessment of overall stigma as well as four stigma subtypes. Psychological distress was assessed at enrollment, 6 months after and 12 months after using the 20-item WHO Self-Report Questionnaire. Two-tailed t-tests were used to determine how stigma differed by various patient characteristics. Logistic regression was used to assess the relationship between stigma and psychological distress as well as to determine the predictors of distress.

Results: Perceived overall stigma in this cohort of patients was high (102.34 $\pm$ 5.65). Overall stigma was higher in unmarried patients (p = 0.005), patients who had not disclosed their HIV status to anyone at enrollment (p < 0.001) and in patients with higher CD4 counts (p = 0.018). In univariate analysis, overall stigma (OR: 1.047, 95% CI 1.002 - 1.093) and personalized stigma (OR: 1.077, 1.001 - 1.158) were associated with psychological distress. In multivariate logistic

regression analysis, older age (aOR: 1.035, 1.003 - 1.068) and female sex (aOR: 2.327, 1.263 - 4.288) were predictors of clinical distress while being married (aOR: 0.323, 0.180 - 0.579) was protective against distress.

Conclusion: There is a need to address mental health in PLWH in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan countries. This should be done by the implementation of stigma prevention measures and the integration of mental health care into HIV care services.

Keywords: HIV, stigma, psychological distress