Medical Student Knowledge, Confidence and Attitudes Towards HIV Care Before and After Elective Placements

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Background

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that targets the immune system, leading to progressive immunodeficiency if left untreated. Despite advances in antiretroviral therapy, HIV remains a major global public health challenge, with an estimated 41 million people living with the condition worldwide in 2025 [1]. Effective HIV care requires not only biomedical knowledge but also an understanding of the socioeconomic, cultural and structural factors influencing prevention, treatment and access to care.

Although most UK medical students receive formal teaching on HIV, opportunities for direct clinical exposure may be limited, potentially affecting students' knowledge, confidence and attitudes towards people living with this condition. International medical electives provide opportunities to encounter HIV care in diverse healthcare settings, offering insight into the clinical and wider challenges associated with HIV management.

Aims

- Describe HIV knowledge, confidence and attitudes among UK medical students and compare these before and after elective placements.
- Explore students' perceptions of HIV-related stigma and differences in care between elective settings and the UK.
- Identify gaps to inform HIV teaching in medical schools.

Approach

Design. A questionnaire was developed in preparation for a CGHP-supported medical elective in Zimbabwe, combining multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale confidence and attitude items, and free-text questions.

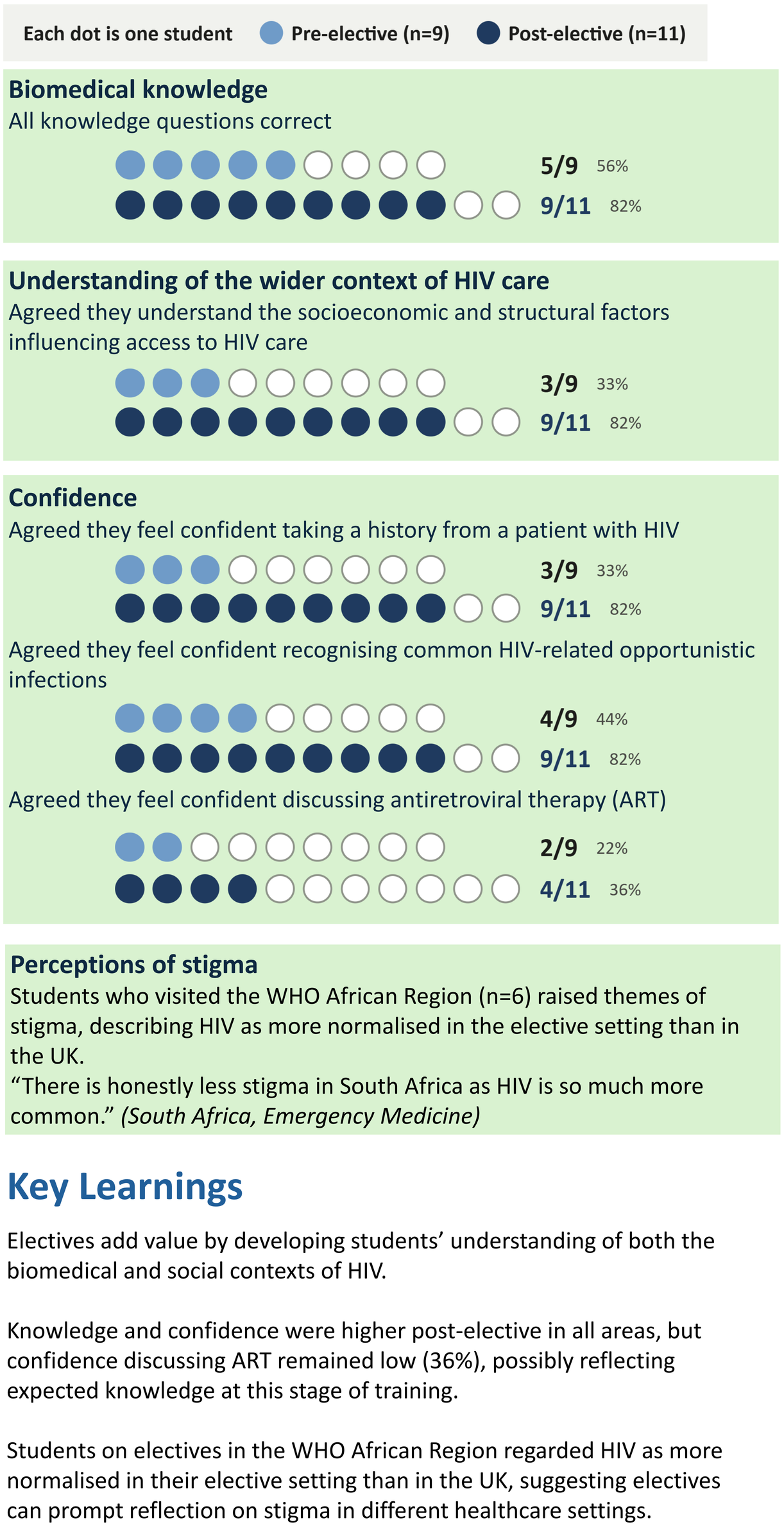
Distribute. The survey was shared via WhatsApp with all penultimate year University of Cambridge Medical students undertaking medical electives between June and August (UK and International), before and after their placements.

Analyse. 20 responses were received (9 pre-elective, 11 post-elective) and analysed descriptively. "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" was counted as agreement. Free-text responses were reviewed for recurring themes.

Limitations

- Small sample size (n=20), results are descriptive and were not statistically tested.
- Pre- and post-elective responses were not paired, so changes reflect differences between groups rather than within individuals.
- Electives varied in location and specialty and results are from a single institution.
- Voluntary recruitment may favour students interested in HIV or global health.

Impact



Perceptions of stigma

Students who visited the WHO African Region (n=6) raised themes of stigma, describing HIV as more normalised in the elective setting than in the UK.

"There is honestly less stigma in South Africa as HIV is so much more common." *(South Africa, Emergency Medicine)*

Key Learnings

Electives add value by developing students' understanding of both the biomedical and social contexts of HIV.

Knowledge and confidence were higher post-elective in all areas, but confidence discussing ART remained low (36%), possibly reflecting expected knowledge at this stage of training.

Students on electives in the WHO African Region regarded HIV as more normalised in their elective setting than in the UK, suggesting electives can prompt reflection on stigma in different healthcare settings.

Recommendations:

- Encourage students to gain experience of other healthcare systems and HIV care.
- Consider ART focused teaching.
- Repeat the survey with paired pre- and post- responses in a larger multi-university and multi-site cohort.

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References:

1. World Health Organization. HIV and AIDS [Internet]. Geneva: WHO; 2026 Jul 27 [cited 2026 Oct 29]. Available from: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hiv-aids