

Oral Communications

## Education and knowledge to reduce the burden of HIV and STIs

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**Title:** Knowledge reduces stigma and generates awareness. The experience of the #cHIVuoleconoscere project in Bergamo

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### Abstract body

**Background:** Don Giuseppe Monticelli Società Cooperativa Sociale promotes in the high schools of Bergamo and its Province the project #cHIVuoleconoscere, which aims to inform students about HIV/AIDS scientifically (what, how it is transmitted and can be prevented), relational (which reasons make communicating the positivity status difficult) and socio-cultural (as the theme of HIV has evolved and presented over the years).

**Materials and Methods:** Students have to complete a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire which investigates scientific knowledge and personal perceptions on HIV themes. Twenty-three questions investigate their scientific knowledge and are transformed into a binary score (yes or no) totalling 23 at the most with highest scores indicating better knowledge. Five questions (on a scale 1 to 10) deal with personal perception of HIV and stigma; again a comprehensive score (max 50) measures their attitude (higher scores = worse attitude).

The research aimed to verify if the intervention would increase knowledge and change perception about HIV reducing preconceptions towards PLWHIV.

**Results:** From October 2019 to February 2023, 5589 students were involved and 4210 compiled both pre and post questionnaires. Of them 1900 were females, 2021 attended a prep high-school, 1910 a technical one and 277 a professional high school. The mean score of the knowledge index pre-intervention was 17.7 (95%CI 17.6-17.7) and it was significantly different ( $P<0.0001$ ) for type of school (prep> technical> professional) and gender (female>male) (Panel A). It significantly increased post-intervention (mean 20.7; 95%CI 20.6-20.7) indicating a better knowledge. The discrimination index, on the contrary, lowered ( $P<0.0001$ ) from a mean of 17.6 (95%CI 17.4-17.9) pre, to 12.4 (95%CI 12.2-12.6) post, indicating a better attitude and reduced stigma (Panel B). There was both pre and post intervention a strict correlation ( $P<0.0001$ ) between the individual level of knowledge and the personal attitude toward HIV problems and PLWHIV.

Despite the age limit for the access to the test, among students attending the training course at schools in 2022, 79 did the test either at the Bergamo Fast Track City check point or during an awareness-raising event organized by students in two institutes (Panel C).

**Conclusions:** Our results indicate how training leads to a spread of correct and appropriate knowledge about HIV also in younger people. The increased awareness has a positive impact on the stigma towards people living with HIV, reducing fear and judgment. In addition, knowledge allows people to take care of their own health approaching sexual health in a more comprehensive and active way as testified by the good number of students who approached for the first time an HIV screening test.



Attach