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Headline: [WATCH] ‘I’m a warrior’: How the anti-HIV injection empowers young women

Blurb: An anti-HIV injection called CAB-LA has just been approved by South Africa’s medicines regulator, and the health department says it could be in clinics by August 2023 — but only if the price is right. In Cape Town, more than 200 women have been using the two-monthly jab as part of a study. We spoke to three of them.

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SCRIPT

NARRATION

If you leave the Cape Town CBD via the N2 highway, in about 20 km you'll get to the township of Nyanga.

It was once named South Africa’s [murder capital](#).

While crime - and its accompanying social ills - are something Amanda Roberts has learnt to live with around here, she’s grateful that she doesn’t also have to live with HIV.

It took her mother’s life in 2016.

AMANDA ROBERTS, CAB-LA study participant

“My mom’s twin also has HIV. That’s why I decided to join the study. Because I didn’t want to go the same route they had to go.”

NARRATION

Amanda is part of a clinical trial, which has been ongoing for the past 5 years.

About 200 young women have chosen to get a new injection every two months.

The shot contains a drug called [cabotegravir or CAB-LA for short](#). It virtually wipes out their chances of contracting HIV through sex.

They get the jab here at the Emavundleni clinic in a part of Nyanga called Crossroads.

For Amanda, the injection has replaced a daily HIV prevention pill she used to take. She struggled to take it regularly.

AMANDA ROBERTS, CAB-LA study participant

“Some days I’m not at home, I’m having fun, so I don’t have my tablets with me – you understand? Because I used to think ‘I’m going to carry tablets to a party? No way’. That’s when the problem started because I used to skip maybe a day, without taking them.”

NARRATION

For Boleka Ntshintshi, the injection is not only more convenient, it’s empowering. This form of HIV prevention is also called PrEP. She says PrEP gives her more control over her life.

BOLEKA NTSHINTSHI, CAB-LA study participant

“It’s important to tell yourself, ‘this is my responsibility to protect myself.’ Because you know men don’t want to use condoms. So, it isn’t about what your partner says, it’s all about you taking responsibility over your life.”

NARRATION

Studies show the injection works better to prevent HIV infection than the daily pill — likely because it’s easier to adhere to.

22-year-old Sinethemba Kolisile says her community needs CAB-LA because of sexual violence.

SINETHEMBA KOLISILE, CAB-LA study participant

“The times we live in are dangerous, and there are a lot of rapes, like within one year there are too many that occur, and you don’t know whether or not your rapist is HIV positive.”

NARRATION

Steven Innes heads the clinical trial unit at Emavundleni.

He says HIV enters the cells in our bodies and makes copies of itself that look like our DNA
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STEVEN INNES, Clinical research leader

“That’s why HIV can’t be cured. Once it’s integrated, once its part of your cells, you can’t get rid of it. Cabotegravir is able to prevent HIV from integrating its DNA into the cell’s DNA. In other words, it prevents the cell from becoming infected in the first place.”

NARRATION

[There were 200 000 new HIV infections in South Africa last year](#), CAB-LA can help to stop this.

But while it may be a game changer there’s a cost factor.

In the United States CAB-LA sells for R54 000 a pop.

ViiV Healthcare, which makes the injection, says they will [lower the price for African countries](#).

But they haven't yet announced how much it will cost.

Amanda, Boleka and Sinethemba hope their friends and loved ones can one day get the same protection as them – from a pandemic that has taken millions of lives.

ENDS

This story was produced by the Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism. Sign up for the newsletter.