

For all children transitioning from primary to secondary school is a big time in their lives. In Kenya this is even more so as for many of our children secondary school means boarding school. Boarding school life is not comfortable, not only is the environment new and strange, but they have left home and the support of their families. Visiting is very restricted to 'open' days only. The regime in boarding school is also very strict, I hear tales that the children are forced to wake up at around 4 am and 'study' before classes. They also study in the evening and go to bed around 10pm. The children fetch water, clean the dormitories and wash their own clothes by hand. It is not an easy life for them!

Upon arrival on the first day at school they line up in a very public queue with all the other children, and have their belongings searched. Some of them are even subjected to a body frisking – all out in the open in front of the other students and teachers. At any time during the term their possessions in the dormitories can also be searched. There is little or no privacy of life or belongings.

This is all a huge problem for the children in my HIV programme. They are on regular medications, often twice a day. There is still a lot of stigma surrounding HIV, and you can imagine no child wants all the other children (or the teachers come to that) to know their diagnosis. Bullying of the first formers is all too common, and the last thing they need is to be singled out as being HIV positive. Unfortunately, not all the teachers or school nurses are sympathetic and helpful either.

The first dilemma on arriving at boarding school, is how to get 3 months' supply of their medication into the school without anyone 'discovering' it? Once they get their treatment into school, where do they store it so it won't be found? How do they take pills twice a day without anyone seeing? Due to these challenges, many children who are doing really well on their treatment all through primary school suddenly it all goes wrong when they go to boarding school.



This month we called our 7 children who were starting in first form secondary school for a Saturday get-together, support and discussion. We went through with them how they would handle the challenges facing them concerning HIV and their treatment in school



Such innovative ideas came out – hollow out a bar of washing soap and put the pills in there (no-one would inspect inside their soap). I did advise that they better only do this for the shortest time or their pills could start tasting of soap! Another idea was to put the drugs inside their umbrella (provided it wasn't raining) – the teachers don't open their umbrellas. Hiding down bras and in knickers were other suggestions! Having a relative throw the drugs over the fence when no-one is watching was an idea also mooted.

They also had thoughts of taking their treatment early in the morning when there is a lot of bustle as students come to and fro from the bathroom and no-one would notice. The evening would be less of a problem after school before study as there are lots of sports activities and other things going on so slipping to the bathroom to take meds would go unnoticed. Imagine our youth in England facing these kinds of challenges and secrecy just to survive and stay well in school.

This kind of forum and discussion is not a “usual” part of health care and hospital activity, but it is a part of the way our programme cares for our patients. Each one has unique needs and we try to care for them as individuals. Mission to us is so much more than just giving patients the correct medication to treat their HIV. It is this tailoring of care that brings to those who are so often marginalised and victimised the love and care of Jesus Christ. Being a member of MMH is so much more than having a job as a health care worker.



Please pray for my young people that they manage to navigate through this transition in their lives and stay on their treatment to remain strong and healthy.

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