

GUATEMALAN HIV PREP STUDY WINS 2018 ROBERT CARR RESEARCH AWARD

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Central America's first study to critically document the process of creating a community-based clinic for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for gay men has been selected to receive the 2018 Robert Carr Research Award.

The project, *Expanding the Options: A case study of collective action to create a community-based pre-exposure prophylaxis clinic for MSM in Guatemala City*, was a collaborative endeavor between Guatemala-based Colectivo Amigos contra el Sida (CAS) and Gillings School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in the United States. The study followed the establishment of the first PrEP clinic in the region and how operators assessed and attempted to mitigate barriers to gay men's access to this emergent HIV prevention method.

"Positioning new prevention methods such as PrEP has been difficult, especially in the very conservative Guatemalan society. It has taken us years, but we have advanced awareness, acceptance, and access to PrEP. This award is an important recognition of this effort. It also generates a new commitment for CAS to continue our work towards the elimination of HIV in the gay and bisexual community that has been so strongly affected by this epidemic by both reducing new infections and improving the health of those affected by HIV," said Cesar Galindo-Arandi, Director of CAS.

In its most common form, PrEP is the practice of HIV-negative persons taking HIV medications on a daily basis to prevent infection should they come in contact with the AIDS virus. Daily use of PrEP has been shown in multiple studies to be between 92% and 99% effective in preventing HIV infection, making it among the most effective forms of prevention available. But while PrEP has been available in many countries for five or more years, issues of access, affordability, and political resistance continue to limit roll-out in Guatemala and most other Latin American countries.

Through a consultative process with communities, CAS determined that the generation of evidence would be the key to unlocking their government's and grassroots communities' support of PrEP as an important HIV prevention tool, for gay men and others. CAS set up and operated the ground-breaking PrEP clinic beginning in 2015. But as Mr. Galindo-Arandi noted, "We needed to generate evidence to demonstrate the strength of our actions so that as a community we can respond to and argue our case more effectively. UNC supported us with scientific knowledge generation and the systematic documentation of CAS's approach to positioning the topic of PrEP within the social landscape. This has helped us in many ways by providing support, credibility and trust to the efforts we are carrying out to reduce new HIV infections." According to the project's application for the Award, as a result of this project, "access to PrEP will expand in the coming years as part of both

Global Fund [to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria] and locally supported initiatives.”

This project represents a highly successful collaboration between researchers and communities, which worked together on all aspects of the design, implementation and analysis. Dr. Clare Barrington, who led the UNC research team, was clear: “This research was not possible without CAS! Without the initiative and determination on the part of CAS to raise awareness about PrEP and create a PrEP clinic, we would not have had a story to explore. This is truly a community-based initiative and our research has aimed to capture and assess the context, process, and outcomes of that initiative. The fact that CAS values the role of research within the work they do was a critical factor in enabling us to develop and carry out this collaborative project.”

This project is the third recipient of the bi-annual Robert Carr Research Award, which is presented in conjunction with the Robert Carr Memorial Lecture during the International AIDS Conference, to be held 23-27 July 2018 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Dr. Robert Carr, who unexpectedly died in 2012, was a world-renowned researcher and powerful advocate for community-academic partnerships in research. The Award and Lecture were established to honor his legacy and raise the profile of such partnerships. This year’s recipient is the first from Robert’s home region of Latin America and the Caribbean.

“On behalf of all the award partners, we are absolutely thrilled to be highlighting this pioneering project. The work of CAS and UNC represents a true community-academic collaboration and is exactly the kind of project we want to recognize in honor of Robert’s legacy,” said Mary Ann Torres, Executive Director of Toronto-based ICASO.

Mr. Galindo-Arandi and Dr. Barrington will deliver the 2018 Robert Carr Memorial Lecture on July 24 at 15.00 at AIDS2018. Information about the Lecture as well as other ICASO activities can be found at www.icaso.org.

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For more information about the Award, including past winners and criteria, please visit <http://icaso.org/2018-robert-carr-research-award-call-for-nominations/>.

For more information about Colectivo Amigos contra el Sida--CAS, please visit <https://casgt.org/>.

