

## ITM launches #letstalkpositive2020

A campaign to change the narrative around living with HIV

14-10-20



Dit is de omschrijving

**The Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp has been a medical service provider and a taboo-breaking champion of HIV-infected people for decades. People with HIV can seek counselling and treatment in our HIV/STI outpatient clinic, where, during the past year 3300 people were being followed up. In the run up to World AIDS Day on 1 December, ITM is launching a campaign called “Let’s talk positive”, to change the narrative around being HIV positive.**

Thousands of people living with HIV are followed up by a multidisciplinary team at the clinic of ITM every year. The multidisciplinary team gives them the support needed to live with a chronic disease as HIV. “Vhiva” is a peer support group organised since 2008 by two social nurses, Wenne Mertens and Cora Lamonte. They hold four meetings per year for people living with HIV on different topics like adherence to medication, disclosure of their HIV status, aging, mental health. Every year they organise an event in the run-up to World AIDS Day. Last year, to break the stigma that still rests on people with HIV, they launched the “Laundry World AIDS Day” campaign, where staff and patients said bye bye to stigma on small paper T-shirts.

Stigma is still present and prevents HIV positive people from reaching out to their community. This year the Vhiva group wants to send a strong message: let's talk positive(ly) about being HIV positive. This campaign invites people to change the negative discourse about living with HIV, to provide support to the affected community. How will this work in practice? Double-sided face masks will be distributed by Vhiva members to ITM staff, patient organisations and their volunteers, other HIV reference centres, ITM visitors, who will be asked to share an encouraging quote and a selfie on social media while wearing the mask. One side reads “Let’s talk positive” (also the main hashtag of the campaign: #letstalkpositive2020), and the other reads “U=U”. This stands for “undetectable = untransmittable”, the relatively little known fact that when a person is living with HIV is on effective treatment, their viral load becomes undetectable, and at this stage, HIV cannot be passed on sexually. Those who live far away from ITM can support the campaign by taking a selfie wearing their most cheerful mask, and posting it on their social media along with a strong message against HIV stigma. Don’t forget to use #letstalkpositive2020 and tag ITM’s account on the relevant platforms.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic we risk to lose focus on HIV-related matters as safe sex, U=U, mental health. With this campaign, by using face masks which have become daily used objects, we want to draw attention to the hardships of people living with HIV. By sharing our photos and messages on social media we hope to create a snowball effect to amplify our message,” said Cora Lamonte and Wenne Mertens.

*The mask campaign was made possible by Gilead, whose grant provided for the making of 1000 mouth masks.*