

## Jacqueline, armed with a smile, “rescues” people who are HIV positive



La Vega. - Jacqueline is an energetic young woman who has worked as a Counsellor for the Dominican Network for People with HIV/AIDS (REDOVIH in its Spanish acronym) at the Dr Morillo King Hospital for the last five years, but she was only employed by the Ministry of Health one year ago. Before that, her work had been entirely voluntary.

Watching Jacqueline, who has been HIV positive for 17 years, at work in the Integrated Care Unit at this health centre, is a chance to prove the respect and regard that the staff has for her.

Everyone in the unit calls her and she moves from one end of the hospital to the other, trying to provide answers for everyone there, as well as during the post-positive test counselling sessions.

As a counsellor, she sees people who are referred to the unit for an HIV test. The work equipment in the room that is used for pre-counselling consists of a flip chart, a TV set, a video, and her skill in sharing information about HIV prevention. For Haitian patients she uses a flipchart in Creole, and the illustrations are very helpful for providing explanations.

She speaks about rights as well as duties. She advises them to join a network, as she considers these networks to be a great support that she did not have access to in her days. She now belongs to a support group called the “Love and Life Group”, which meets on the last Friday of every month and where members share stories of their life, adherence, co-existence, etc.

Jaque, as she is also known, provides follow-up for people, conducts “rescues” of people who need to go on receiving care and antiretroviral medication (adherence rescues), and who for a range of reasons have stopped attending the care unit. She highlights the plight of pregnant women. “Many pregnant women ‘get lost’ in their communities, mostly Haitians, as they don’t provide genuine information and are difficult to find. They are afraid because of their immigration status”, she clarifies.

She regrets that so many HIV positive women don’t protect themselves and become pregnant again “It’s as if they don’t believe in transmission and it looks like they come to waste time here receiving counselling”.

In the typical accent of the Cibao region she tells us, “often during home visits I introduce myself as a friend who is coming to give a talk, to spend time socialising with them”, and she always respects the privacy that people wish to maintain about their

condition.

Her own condition has helped her obtain a better understanding of the situation faced by some families, who don't want anyone to know the truth. "Some time ago I went to Junumucú to make a home visit and I came across a wake. A sister of the person I was visiting had died of AIDS, due to ignorance. But at the wake the cause of death was a secret", she tells us with an air of sadness.

This young woman's enthusiasm is contagious, and her hard work does not stop at the end of the working day. At home in the evening she updates the registers on her PC, "I have half the world on my list, with pregnant mothers, young people, Haitians, and everyone knows me, I feel important", she says with a smile.

There is a serious lack of materials, resources and media at the ICU, but this does not seem to affect Jacqueline too much, as every day she tries to warn people about HIV and how to prevent it.