Client perspectives on six-month dispensing of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in South Africa

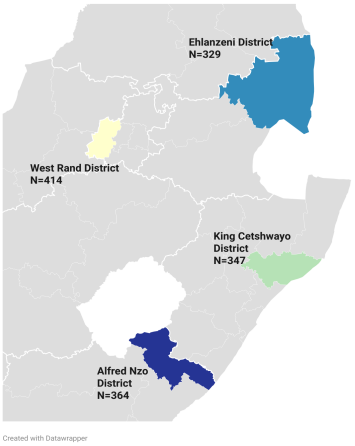
WHY THIS MATTERS

- Six-month dispensing (6MMD) of antiretroviral therapy (ART) has been implemented in many countries, leading to increased client satisfaction and lower client costs without compromising outcomes.
- In South Africa, three-month maximum ART dispensing is the current standard for clients established on treatment.
- The 2023 South Africa ART guidelines allow for six-month dispensing (6MMD) for stable clients, but 6MMD has not yet been implemented nationally.
- Understanding clients' views on 6MMD can facilitate the current rollout of this policy in South Africa.

HOW WE DID IT

- From 30 August 2024 to 4 July 2025, SENTINEL surveyed clients at 24 public health sector clinics in Alfred Nzo, Ehlanzeni, King Cetshwayo, and West Rand districts (Fig 1).
- Using a structured questionnaire, we interviewed clients ≥18 who had been on ART for at least 6 months and were enrolled in either conventional care (CC) or in differentiated models of care (DMOC) (facility or external pickup points) at a SENTINEL site clinic.
- Clients were asked about their perspectives on receiving a six-month supply of medication at once, including anticipated benefits and challenges.
- We analysed quantitative and open-ended responses, illustrating clients' perspectives on the acceptability of 6MMD, its anticipated benefits, and their concerns.
- Results are stratified by DMOC status: conventional care not eligible for DMOC; conventional care eligible for DMOC but not enrolled; and enrolled in DMOC.

Fig 1. SENTINEL study sites



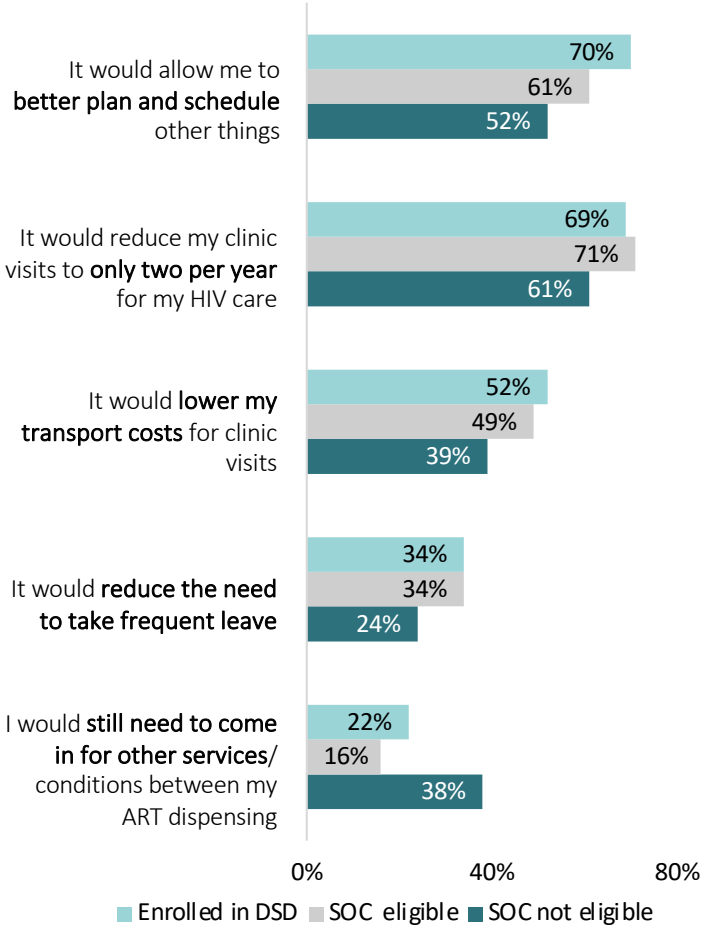
WHAT WE FOUND

- A total of 1,454 participants were enrolled (median age: 41 years; 75% female).
- 70% of participants had been on ART for five or more years.
- 57% expressed a preference for receiving six months of medication at once.
- 86% reported that they would find it acceptable to receive six months of medication at once, including 89% of those on ART only and 76% of those on ART plus NCD medications.
- Clients said that anticipated benefits of receiving a six-month supply included reducing the number of clinic visits, lowering overall costs associated with visiting the clinic (e.g., transport, food), minimizing loss of income, and providing more time for other activities (Figure 2).
- Clients who found six-month dispensing not acceptable cited a desire for consistent provider interactions and concerns about missing medications and medication expiration.

Table 1. Characteristics of enrolled participants

Characteristic (n,%)	CC not eligible (N=742)	CC eligible not enrolled (N=237)	Enrolled in DMOC (N=475)	Total (N=1,454)
Age, median (Q1, Q3)	40 (32, 49)	39 (32, 46)	43 (37, 52)	41 (34, 49)
Female, n (%)	547 (74)	177 (75)	372 (78)	1096 (75)
Level of education, n (%)				
Primary school or less	354 (48)	106 (45)	232 (49)	692 (48)
Completed high school	296 (40)	107 (45)	188 (40)	591 (41)
Post-high school	92 (12)	24 (10)	55 (12)	171 (12)
Time on ART, n (%)				
6 months -1 year	42 (6)	29 (12)	4 (1)	75 (5)
2-4 years	204 (27)	67 (28)	84 (18)	355 (24)
5-9 years	295 (40)	74 (31)	176 (37)	545 (37)
≥10 years	201 (27)	67 (28)	211 (44)	479 (33)
Preferred ART dispensing duration, n (%)				
1-2 months	64 (9)	5 (2)	18 (4)	87 (6)
3 months	278 (37)	73 (31)	115 (24)	466 (32)
4-5 months	8 (1)	0 (0)	4 (1)	12 (1)
6 months	374 (50)	147 (62)	311 (65)	832 (57)
9 -12 months	16 (2)	11 (5)	24 (5)	51 (4)
No preference	2 (0)	1 (0)	3 (1)	6 (0)

Figure 2. Proportion of participants who agreed that 6MMD would impact care seeking experiences



Did anything predict the acceptability of 6-month dispensing?

We estimated crude risk ratios (RR) to determine whether any characteristics of participants made them more or less likely to find 6MMD acceptable. We found:

- Women, those with a post-high school qualification, and those eligible for DSD models (whether enrolled or not) were slightly more likely to find 6MMD acceptable than were men, those with less education, and DSD-ineligible clients (significant RRs between 1.06 and 1.09).
- People on both ART and NCD medication were a little less likely to accept 6MMD than were those on ART only (RR 0.86). So were unemployed people, compared to those employed (RR 0.92) and people in King Cetshwayo (RR 0.90) and Alfred Nzo (RR 0.86) districts, compared to West Rand and Ehlanzeni.
- There were no differences in 6MMD's acceptability by age group, marital status, or time on ART.

*Open-ended response findings**

Why clients would find 6 months of ART *acceptable*:

"It **reduces my clinic visits**, because I don't see a need to come to the clinic if I am okay"
– *Female, 25-34 years, Ex-PuP*

"I would appreciate having more treatment so that the **clinic would not be so congested**"
– *Female, 50 years plus, SOC-eligible*

"I'm an informal trader, **so I suffer a loss when I visit the clinic**. A 6-month supply of treatment will give me enough time to focus on my work since I will have my medication on hand"
– *Female, aged 35-49, adherence club*

"I take my treatment as prescribed, and it will **save me transport costs"**
– *Male, 35-49 years, Facility PuP*

Why clients would find 6 months of ART *unacceptable*:

"I am **happy with receiving three months'** supply of medication as I need to come for a check-up on a regular basis"
– *Female, 50 years plus, Ex-PuP*

"I must not take **too long without seeing a health care provider**"
– *Male, 35-49 years, Ex-PuP*

"I will **forget my appointment**"
– *Female, 35-49 years, adherence club*

"I'm worried **about the expiry dates of the treatment,** so 6 months is not fine for me because I fear that they can be damaged"
– *Female, 35-49 years, Ex-PuP*

**Results from clients taking ART only, not co-morbid.*

- 98% of participants did NOT express any concerns about transportation, storage, or space for 6-month medication supplies. Those who did said,

Transportation: "*Too much for me to carry*." "*6 bottles will attract the attention of people.*"

Storage: "*Shacks are made out of plastic and are hot, what about the quality of the medication*?"

Space: "*We are overcrowded and there are people within the family I don't want them to know my HIV status*." "*I don't have space to store and I won't have privacy*."

WHAT IT MEANS

- More than 80% of established ART clients surveyed in South Africa said that 6MMD would be acceptable.
- Most envisioned a range of benefits, including fewer clinic visits, shorter waiting times, and lower costs, but some were concerned about loss of contact with the clinic, forgetting appointments, and lack of private storage space.
- A dispensing policy that allowed clients to choose between 3- and 6-month dispensing would maximize client benefits and minimize their costs.

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