

THE RHSP NEWSLETTER

The Official Newsletter of Rakai Health Sciences Program



Picture above: Students from various universities pose for a group photo after their orientation with Human Resource Manager, Joan Nankya. Picture below: Students from Western University during a field visit to Malembo fishing village in Kyotera District, guided by William Daaki.



RHSP Internship Season: Shaping Future Health Leaders

From May to July 2025, the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) was energized by the arrival of a dynamic new cohort of interns, joining us from institutions across Uganda and beyond—including Makerere University, Columbia University, Western University, Uganda Martyrs University, Kampala International University, and Makerere University Business School.

These students bring with them a spirit of inquiry, a passion for service, and a deep curiosity about the communities we serve. Whether supporting our research teams, contributing to data analysis, assisting in clinical settings, or engaging in community mobilization, each intern gained hands-on experience that bridges theory with practice.

“It was highly valuable to me as a statistics student,” shared Richard Mugera from Makerere University. “We gained practical skills in map reading for the study area and using REDCap, and were encouraged to explore areas we wanted to learn more about.”

Among this year’s interns are graduate researchers contributing to the Rakai Orphans in Community (ROC) project, which investigates the geographic patterns of orphanhood and adolescent behavioral outcomes across the district.

Subba Demby, a medical student from Columbia University, reflected: “From Kaliziso to Kampala, it’s been a privilege to explore this beautiful country and learn from the communities we serve. I’m grateful for the opportunity to continue this meaningful work alongside the dedicated RHSP team.”



Western University students Abdirahman Mohamed Salat and Stephanie Pyz, together with RHSP Health Education and Community Mobilization team member Ivan Kisitu, watching a football match at Ndeeba playground in the Kabira cluster, Kyotera District.



Rachel Kantor, Lily Coll and Llyod Sydney from Columbia University during their orientation with Anthony Ndyabo in the Data Management and Statistics section.

Lily Coll, also from Columbia, added: “Thank you for the very warm welcome, RHSP. I look forward to a summer of learning and growth, collaborating on the ROC project and deepening my understanding of the burden of orphanhood in Rakai.”

At RHSP, we are proud to serve as a center for capacity building—where mentorship, collaboration, and community engagement converge to nurture the next generation of public health leaders.

To our interns: thank you for your energy, insight, and commitment. You are helping shape a healthier future, and we are honored to be part of your journey.

Bridging Climate and Health: RHSP and University of Michigan Advance Community-Centered Research in Uganda

“ This kind of meaningful collaboration—across borders, disciplines, and institutions—is exactly what drives impactful research. ”



Prof. Joe Eisenberg , Andrea Mahieu and Dr. Gertrude Nakigozi visit Namirembe fishing village

RHSP was honored to welcome Prof. Joe Eisenberg and Andrea Mahieu from the University of Michigan during their recent visit to Namirembe fishing village, a community in South-Central Uganda deeply affected by climate-related events.

The visit was part of the ongoing Uganda Climate Shock Survey, which explores the intersection of health and climate extremes such as drought, flooding, and heat waves.

The team's engagement focused on refining research methodologies, improving data quality, and strengthening collaborative ties between RHSP and the University of Michigan.

Together, we worked to ensure that the study not only meets rigorous scientific standards but also reflects the lived realities of communities navigating climate shocks.

This kind of meaningful collaboration—across borders, disciplines, and institutions—is exactly what drives impactful research,” noted the University of Michigan Center for Global Health Equity in a LinkedIn post.

“It’s a powerful example of what’s possible when community knowledge, academic expertise, and trusted partnerships come together.”

The visit reaffirmed RHSP’s commitment to advancing research that is both scientifically robust and deeply rooted in community engagement. Insights from this collaboration will inform future studies and contribute to more responsive, equitable approaches to climate and health challenges in Uganda and beyond.

Prof. Joe Eisenberg , Andrea Mahieu and Dr. Gertrude Nakigozi having a conversation while they tour Namirembe fishing village.



RHSP Hosts ICHAD and NYU Delegation to Strengthen Health Systems

On July 23, 2025, RHSP proudly welcomed a distinguished delegation from the International Center for Child Health and Development (ICHAD), accompanied by Dr. Michael A. Lindsey, Dean of the NYU Silver School of Social Work. The visit marked a pivotal moment in advancing global collaborations focused on HIV, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and mental health.

Led by Dr. Fred Ssewamala, the delegation included esteemed colleagues Prof. Proscovia Nabunya, Dr. Juliet Allen Babirye, Dr. Anita Kabarambi, Dr. Imelda Nabbosa, Jeniffer Nattabi, Bethel Mandefro, and Senior Advisor to the Dean, Aimee Vergas.

The visit also served to introduce Dr. Lindsey to ICHAD's vibrant network of collaborators across Uganda.



Dr. Ronald Galiwango giving the the Dr. Lindsey and the ICHAD team a tour of the RHSP lab.

Strategic discussions spotlighted RHSP's legacy of innovation—from pioneering research to shaping global health policy and explored new frontiers for integrating mental health services, including suicide prevention, into the Rakai Community Cohort Study. Together, we envisioned a community-responsive care model tailored to the unique needs of the Greater Masaka region.

The visit concluded with a guided tour of RHSP's facilities, offering the delegation a firsthand look at the program's multidisciplinary approach and deep-rooted commitment to public health.

Advancing Pandemic Preparedness: RHSP and UVRI Launch Marburg Seroprevalence Study in Kyotera



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By learning who has been exposed to Marburg and how it spreads, we can help communities stay safer today and be better prepared for future outbreaks.

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RHSP, in collaboration with the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI), has embarked on a critical study to assess the seroprevalence of the Marburg virus in Kyotera District. The study aims to determine whether individuals have previously been exposed to the virus—information that could be vital in shaping Uganda’s preparedness for future outbreaks.

In July, a team from UVRI is conducted intensive protocol training for RHSP staff ahead of the study’s field launch. The sessions covered key components of the research process, including participant identification, informed consent procedures, safe transport to study hubs, and rigorous quality checks.

Special emphasis was placed on professional conduct during interviews, ethical sample collection, and secure data management using REDCap.

“By learning who has been exposed to Marburg and how it spreads, we can help communities stay safer today and be better prepared for future outbreaks.” explained one of the trainers.



Picture on the left: A group image of RHSP and UVRI staff after the training. **Picture on the right:** An RHSP medical officer conducting household visits to collect samples and take measurements from study participants.

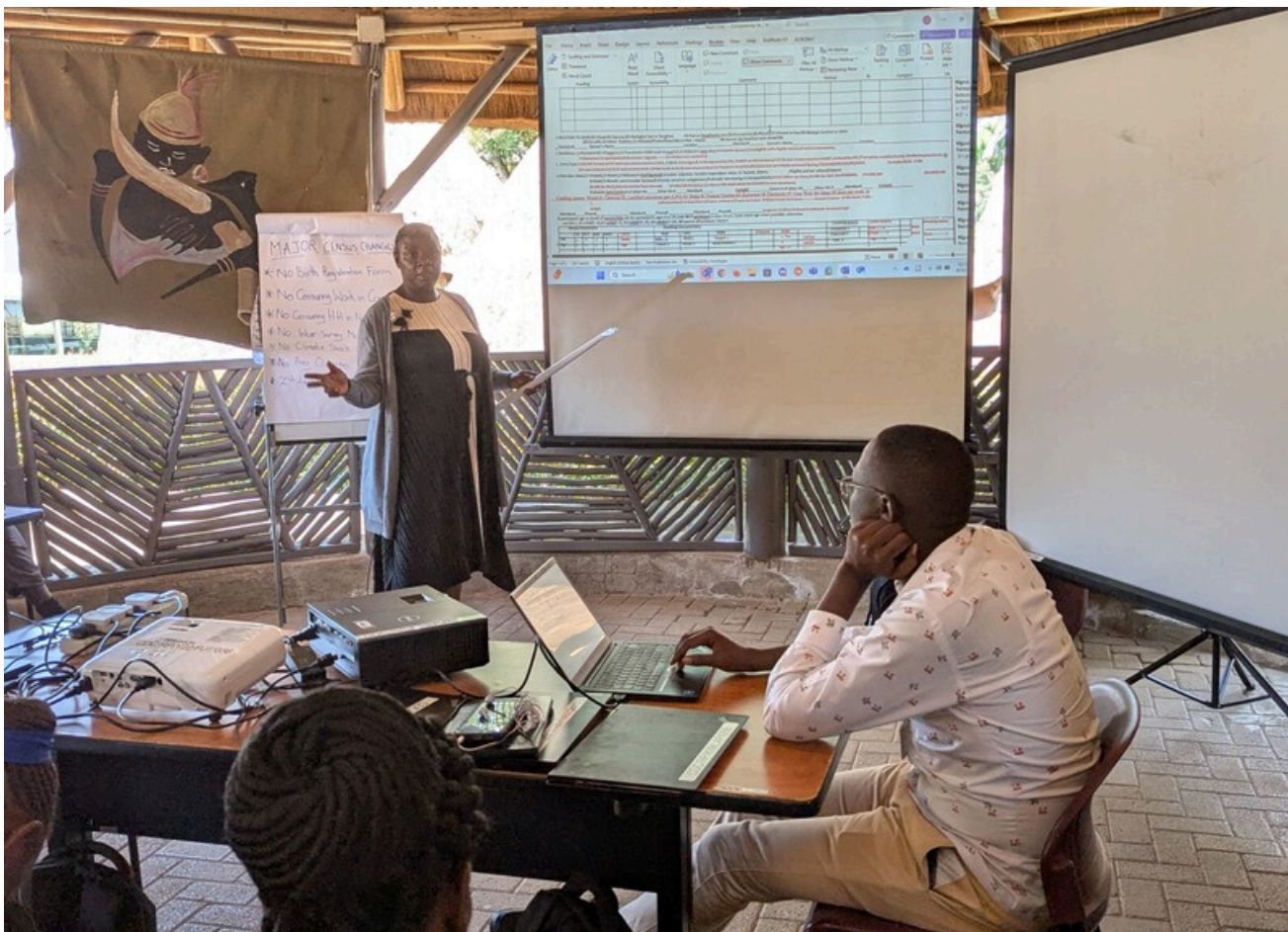
The training also included a deep dive into Marburg virus transmission, symptoms, and risks associated with participation in the study. Participants will be asked to consent to genetic testing and sample storage, with all procedures designed to uphold the highest standards of safety and confidentiality.

The insights gained from this study will not only inform national response strategies but may also contribute to global efforts to understand and control emerging infectious diseases. Field activities are set to begin soon, marking a significant step forward in Uganda's proactive approach to epidemic preparedness.

Rakai Community Cohort Study Team Completed Intensive Training to Launch Round 22 with Confidence

From June 13th to 19th, the Rakai Community Cohort Study (RCCS) team laid the groundwork for a successful Round 22 through a week of intensive, hands-on training.

Together, RHSP's Data and Statistics, Quality Control, Health Education, and Community Mobilization (HECM) departments staff engaged in practical sessions designed to sharpen skills and strengthen cohesion across teams.



Grace Kigozi from Quality Control leading a session during the training.



Absalom Ssettuba, Head of Data Management, leading a session during the training.

The training featured REDCap refresher modules, guided data entry practice, and in-depth reviews of study questionnaires. Field teams openly shared challenges from previous rounds, sparking thoughtful dialogue and collaborative problem-solving with team leaders. The HECM team played a key role in refining study messaging—ensuring clarity, consistency, and shared understanding across all sites.

This preparatory phase reflects RHSP's unwavering commitment to participant-centered care, data integrity, and continuous learning. With renewed confidence and shared purpose, the RCCS team is ready to launch Round 22.

➤ RHSP and CHIESI Engages in Care Dialogue

RHSP leadership—including Prof. David Serwadda and Drs. Godfrey Kigozi, Gertrude Nakigozi, and Fred Nalugoda—met with CHIESI Foundation representatives Alessandra Folcio and Mario Scuri to explore collaborative opportunities in neonatology and pulmonology.

The CHIESI Foundation, renowned for its commitment to maternal, newborn, and respiratory health across the Global South, shared its vision and ongoing initiatives. Together, the teams identified promising areas for partnership that could drive sustainable, high-impact health interventions for vulnerable communities in Uganda.



➤ Dr. Anna Bershteyn visits RHSP



On July 11th, RHSP was honored to host Dr. Anna Bershteyn, Associate Professor at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, for a dynamic exchange of ideas and innovation.

In partnership with Dr. Oliver Laeyendecker, Dr. Bershteyn is advancing a groundbreaking study to identify antibody signatures of HIV viral suppression, an approach that could enable rapid, low-cost, point-of-care monitoring and predict treatment failure using serological data.

The study will leverage RHSP's repository at Johns Hopkins University, offering new possibilities for improved HIV care and outcomes. Dr. Bershteyn also led an inspiring seminar on data visualization, sparking thoughtful dialogue on how visual storytelling can elevate public health research and impact.

RHSP receives thermo scientific freezer from NIH

RHSP has received a Thermo Scientific freezer from National Institutes of Health (NIH) through NIH Director , Dr. Steve Reynolds, to support the collection and preservation of samples before and after processing.

This contribution will further strengthen RHSP’s laboratory capacity and ongoing research efforts.



The thermo scientific freezer installed inside the RHSP lab.



RHSP to be Featured in National HIV Documentary

Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) will be featured in an upcoming documentary by the Uganda AIDS Commission, spotlighting this year’s World AIDS Day theme: “Education and HIV.”

The documentary explores how increased access to education may influence reductions in HIV acquisition and early pregnancy among adolescents, and how education provides an important opportunity for managing HIV—a critical conversation for Uganda’s future.

Tune in for powerful insights from leading voices in public health, including Prof. David Serwadda, Prof. John Santelli, and other experts shaping the dialogue on youth, education, and HIV prevention.

Dr. Kigozi Honored for a Decade of Impactful Collaboration

Our Executive Director, Dr. Godfrey Kigozi, together with the entire RHSP team, was honored by the International Center for Child Health and Development (ICHAD) with an award recognizing over a decade of impactful collaboration.

For more than ten years, RHSP and ICHAD worked hand in hand to advance research that improved the health and well-being of children and adolescents in Uganda. This partnership fostered evidence-based solutions, strengthened community health systems, and contributed to a brighter future for young people across the country.



Dr. Robert Ssekubugu Earns PhD from Karolinska Institutet

Dr. Robert Ssekubugu successfully completed his PhD at Karolinska Institutet, marking a significant milestone in his academic and professional journey.

His dissertation, “The Impact of Response Timing, Mobile Telephone Use, and Use of Collection Tools on Survey Bias: Evidence from Rakai, Uganda,” offered valuable insights into improving data quality in public health research.

We proudly celebrate this achievement and commend Dr. Ssekubugu’s unwavering dedication to advancing epidemiological science.

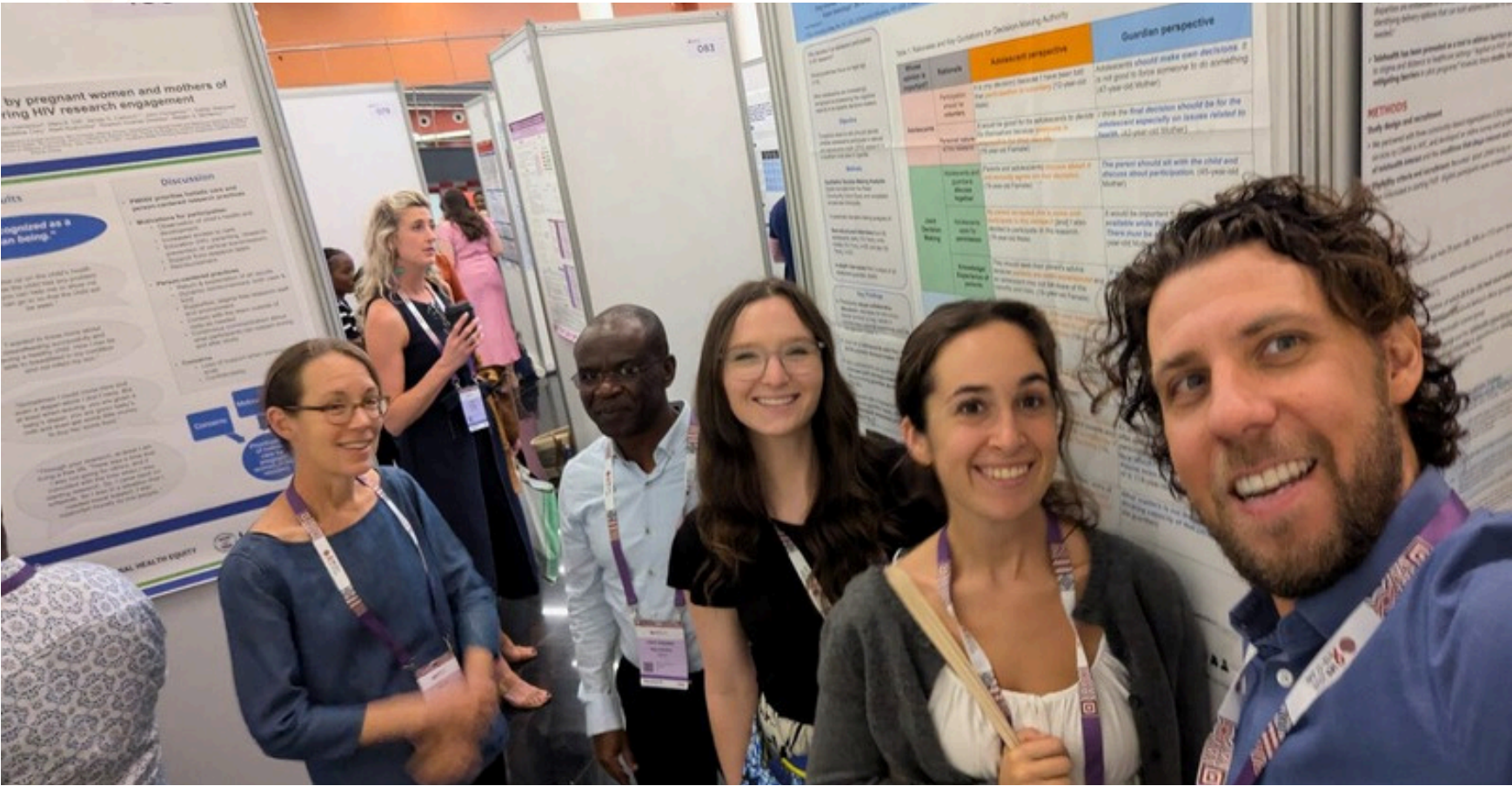


RHSP Showcases Research at the IAS 2025 Conference in Kigali, Rwanda

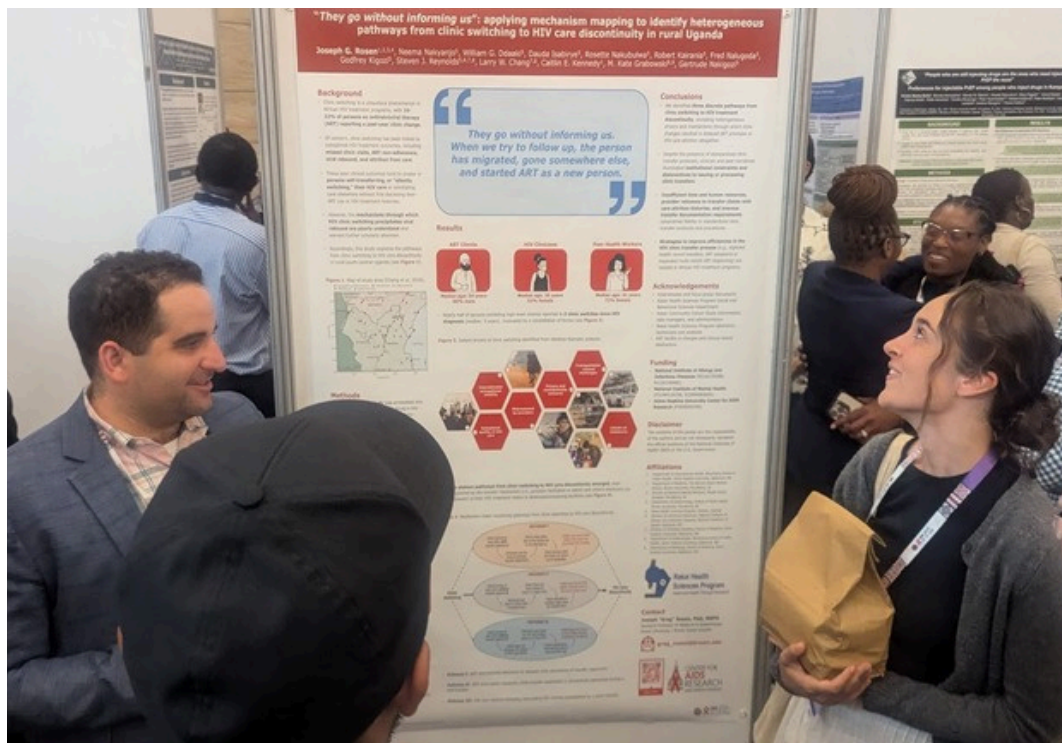
In July 13-18 2025, Kigali became the epicenter of global HIV dialogue, hosting the International AIDS Society (IAS) Conference—a gathering marked by both celebration and urgency. Nearly 4,000 in-person attendees and thousands more online converged to share scientific breakthroughs, confront funding challenges, and reaffirm a collective commitment to equity and innovation in the HIV response.

Among the voices shaping this pivotal moment were eleven scientists and students from the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) and its partners, who presented seven abstracts that reflected Uganda’s leadership in HIV research, prevention, and community-driven care.

The event also featured over 142 oral presentations and 1,400+ posters (around 600 presented live), showcasing vital insights from Africa and beyond, shaping the path forward.



Picture 1: Dr Phil Kreniske, Prof John Santelli and Dr Fred Nalugoda pose for a picture together. **Picture 2:** Prof John Santelli with Rachel Kantor, Lily Coll and Llyod Sydney students from Columbia University. **Picture 3:** A selfie moment at the IAS Conference in front of the posters



Highlights from IAS 2025 in Kigali

Launch of the Kigali Declaration-

A commitment issued by a broad coalition, including scientists, policymakers, and community leaders, called for renewed global solidarity in the HIV response.

The declaration emphasized meaningful partnerships grounded in equity and local leadership; Sustained support for global HIV research, especially vaccine development; scaling up HIV prevention (PrEP, condoms, new technologies); human rights protection to safeguard marginalized groups; and upholding scientific integrity over politics in public health endeavors.

Emerging HIV Prevention Technologies featuring Long-acting PrEP stood out prominently.

Lenacapavir biannual injectable PrEP received WHO guideline endorsement following the promising PURPOSE 1 trial results. Agreements between the Global Fund and Gilead aimed at ensuring access to Lenacapavir in low- and middle-income countries were discussed; Merck's MK-8527, a once-monthly oral PrEP candidate, which entered Phase 3 trials; and licensing of cabotegravir (CAB-LA) for PrEP was expanded to support generic production were among the highlights.

The Rise of HIV Self-Testing (HIVST)-HIVST was acknowledged as a crucial tool for scaling up prevention and care, especially for adolescents and key populations; and integrating HIVST into PrEP programming could reduce costs and enhance privacy, with pilot countries like Zimbabwe and Zambia already exploring this synergy.

Triple Elimination in Maternal Care showed that momentum was building for the integrated elimination of HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis B in antenatal settings, and WHO prequalification of a triple test and supportive innovation and financing structures offer a real opportunity to streamline prevention for mothers and infants.

The Funding Challenges & Program Vulnerabilities - Sharp cuts in U.S. PEPFAR funding and wider donor fatigue were front-and-center, threatening gains in testing, treatment, and community-led programs, and speakers highlighted risks such as rising HIV acquisition rates and gaps in service delivery if funding patterns continue to deteriorate.

Science, Equity & Global Commitment was discussed and echoed as a core message emphasizing that scientific breakthroughs and equity must go hand in hand; Community leadership was celebrated as central, not peripheral, to scientific progress; and advocacy leaders warned of slipping back as not an option, but sustaining HIV gains hinges on solidarity and rights-based, locally driven action.

The next steps included rolling Out Innovations Equitably, operationalizing the Kigali Declaration, pushing for Triple Elimination Programs, Protecting Treatment Gains Amid Funding Cuts, sustaining HIV Research & Vaccine Efforts, and building Accountability & Global Solidarity.

“...this is truly a heartbreaking scenario. Yet the urgency is matched by resolve. Do I see resurgence of HIV? Absolutely, I would bet my money on it , warns RHSP founder Prof. David Serwadda. ”



A health worker tending to a client during the oral health study camp at Ddimbo landing site

In Rakai, where HIV prevalence remains among the highest in Uganda, the Rakai Health Sciences Program has long been a beacon of innovation and care—cutting new infections by 90%, expanding access to antiretrovirals, and shaping global HIV policy.

Now, amid shifting U.S. funding and policy setbacks, RHSP faces new challenges. but not alone. Communities, clinicians, and researchers are rallying to protect hard-won progress and reimagine sustainable, locally driven solutions.

“We were at the cusp of really achieving something amazing,” reflects RHSP epidemiologist Dr. Kate Grabowski.

“So this is truly a heartbreaking scenario.” Yet the urgency is matched by resolve. “Do I see resurgence of HIV? Absolutely, I would bet my money on it,” warns RHSP founder Prof. David Serwadda but he and others remain committed to ensuring that history does not repeat itself.

“So this is truly a heartbreaking scenario.” Yet the urgency is matched by resolve. “Do I see resurgence of HIV? Absolutely, I would bet my money on it,” warns RHSP founder Prof. David Serwadda.

As we reflect on RHSP’s journey featured in **On the Cusp of Eliminating HIV** by Brian W. Simpson, we are reminded that the fight against HIV/AIDS is not over. By reading and sharing this story, you can help amplify awareness, inspire action, and strengthen global support toward an HIV-free future. Read the full article here: <https://magazine.publichealth.jhu.edu/2025/cusp-eliminating-hiv>



On 10th July 2025, RHSP came alive with the vibrant energy of the 2025 Talent Show—a joyful celebration of in-house brilliance, teamwork, and triumph.

More than 40 staff members took to the stage, showcasing their talents through music, poetry, comedy, dance, fashion, gymnastics, and brain-teasing games.

The atmosphere was electric, fueled by enthusiastic cheers and heartfelt support from colleagues across the organization.

Every act received well-deserved recognition, with certificates of appreciation and exciting prizes—including mobile phones, power banks, and TV sets—adding to the excitement.

We extend our deepest thanks to RHSP leadership, management, and the Health and Social Welfare Committee for organizing this unforgettable event.

It was a powerful reminder of the joy, unity, and talent that thrive within our community.

RHSP TEAM VISIT ST JOSEPH CATHOLIC PARISH MATALE FOR CARITAS



On 11th May 2025, RHSP's Catholic community joined hands with the Church in Kalisizo, Kyotera for the annual Caritas event—an uplifting moment of solidarity and compassion. Staff members contributed gift hampers filled with food, clothing, and financial support, reflecting a shared commitment to mutual care and dignity. The Church acknowledged RHSP's continued presence—not only through scientific collaboration but also through meaningful gestures that affirm the value of every individual in the community.

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