v. 5, n. 29, 2025

International Journal of Health Science

Acceptance date: 30/09/2025

STUDENT-LED HIV/ AIDS AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

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Abstract: Context: The proposal for a global effort to eradicate AIDS as a public health threat by 2030, proposed by the United Nations (UN), has motivated several initiatives today. Thus, with a view to achieving this goal, student-led public health campaigns were carried out by medical students at the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (PUC Campinas) in 2015, 2018, and 2023. This study evaluates the impact of the campaign on HIV/AIDS awareness and its effectiveness as a model for similar initiatives at other institutions. **Methods:** The campaigns were organized by medical students from PUC Campinas, members of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA). These were developed iteratively over the years, with data collection and evaluations that guided subsequent changes to the program. Students received specialized training on HIV/AIDS before distributing educational materials. On the last day of the campaign, students talked to the population in public places such as parks, bus stations, and shopping malls. Participants received information on HIV/AIDS prevention, disease, and treatment, and their knowledge was assessed through questionnaires administered before and after the campaigns. **Results:** Among the 3,150 individuals approached during the campaigns, 78% had limited knowledge about HIV testing and AIDS symptoms. After the campaign, 88% of participants considered their knowledge about rapid testing and AIDS symptoms to be satisfactory. These results demonstrate the positive impact of the campaign in improving participants' awareness and understanding. The campaigns inspired local leadership, innovation, and a search for knowledge among students. **Conclusion:** This study highlights the impact of student-led public health campaigns on knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS. The campaigns effectively addressed information gaps, resulting in greater knowledge about topics such as rapid testing and AIDS symptoms. These findings reinforce the importance of educational initiatives in health training and provide support for the future development of curricula that promote public health awareness and education.
Keywords: HIV, AIDS, awareness, public health, curriculum, education.

INTRODUCTION

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic has resulted in the deaths of approximately 35 million individuals from diseases associated with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) [4]. Over the last few decades, significant efforts have been directed toward the development of effective strategies for early detection of HIV, as well as the implementation of appropriate therapeutic regimens. In the Brazilian context, screening for HIV infection in adolescents, adults, and pregnant women is widely recognized as a fundamental strategy for promoting public health. According to the Clinical Protocol and Therapeutic Guidelines (PCDT) for the Management of HIV Infection in Adults, published by the Ministry of Health, testing is recommended for all sexually active individuals, with a special emphasis on key populations, including pregnant women, individuals with sexually transmitted infections (STIs), men who have sex with men, transgender individuals, and sex workers [2].

The Ministry of Health has identified robust evidence that early diagnosis, as recommended by the PCDT, allows for rapid linkage to antiretroviral treatment, with positive impacts on reducing AIDS-related morbidity and mortality, as well as decreasing HIV transmission at the population level. In addition, the public agency also reinforces that the risks associated with testing and treating infections identified through screening are minimal, especially given the clinical and epidemiological benefits observed

Antigen/antibody serological tests are widely recognized for their high accuracy, with sensitivity ranging from 99.76% to 100% and specificity from 99.50% to 100%, and are capable of providing results within two days. Alternatively, rapid tests are available for diagnosis in a shorter time frame. As recommended by the Ministry of Health, screening should be performed on a voluntary basis, with the patient's consent and understanding.

In line with global efforts, the United Nations (UN) has set a goal of eliminating AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 through the so-called 95-95-95 strategy. This goal establishes that, by 2025, 95% of people living with HIV should be aware of their serological status ([8]). In this context, HIV testing plays a fundamental role in achieving the first goal of this strategy. The literature has shown that public health campaigns aimed at promoting testing and raising public awareness are important tools for tackling the epidemic ([14]).

In this context, this report describes the implementation of HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns led by medical students, with the aim of increasing community knowledge on the subject, especially on HIV screening. In addition, the organization of events such as this not only promotes a positive impact on awareness, but also encourages student engagement in the defense of global health, encouraging local actions with a global perspective. "Act locally, think globally" is the motto of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), an organization run by medical students, which was responsible for connecting and training students to promote these campaigns.

The stigma historically attributed to HIV/AIDS, which is still present in various social spheres, was also a reason for students to organize these social actions as a public health issue. The stigmatization of HIV/AIDS has deep historical roots, dating back to the 1980s, when the media used expressions such as "gay plague" to refer to AIDS, which promoted the association of the disease with marginalized groups and contributed to the perpetuation of prejudices, especially against homosexuals and transgender people.

In order to understand the local reality and prepare adequately for dialogue with the community, students made technical visits to the HIV/AIDS Reference Center in the municipality of Campinas. To achieve this goal, theoretical classes on the topic were given and discussions were held on the practical experiences of the professionals at this center. Surprisingly, the students found a receptive response from the community, challenging preconceived notions and demonstrating that the local community was interested in learning about the topic.

During the planning of the campaign, the historical and structural relevance of the Unified Health System (SUS) in addressing the HIV epidemic in Brazil was identified. Since its creation in 1988, the SUS has established itself as a public policy aimed at universal access to health care, influenced in part by the mobilization of the LGBTQIAPN+ community ([5]). Notable achievements include the free distribution of antiretroviral drugs since 1991 and the institutionalization of World AIDS Day in the country.

The campaigns referred to in this study benefited directly from the SUS structure. The students' prior training was conducted by the Municipal Reference Center, providing free training and promoting the dissemination of qualified information on HIV prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. In this way, the action established links between the history of the epidemic in Brazil, the public health system, and the active participation of civil society. As a result, the students did not incur any costs for this class and, through discussions held in conversation circles with those responsible for the center, were able to clarify the function and importance of this location and its importance in serving the population.

International Journal of Health Science ISSN 2764-0159 DOI https://doi.org/10.22533/at.ed.159529251508

During the literature review, a scarcity of reports on student-led educational campaigns was observed. Most studies focus on interventions carried out in institutions with institutional funding and government support, which limits the replicability of these initiatives in less favorable contexts. The experience reported here, conducted without formal funding, demonstrates the feasibility of low-cost, student-led educational projects that can be adapted to different socioeconomic realities.

In addition, a gap was noted in the training of medical students to address the stigma associated with HIV, especially with regard to community action in adverse contexts. The campaign enabled the engagement of the local population without negative reactions, contrary to the initial expectation of resistance to dialogue on the topic.

Considering the historical, social, and institutional context described above, this article aims to answer the following question: What is the impact of a student-led public health campaign on increasing community knowledge about HIV/AIDS? The main hypothesis was: A student-led public health campaign will significantly increase community knowledge about HIV/AIDS symptoms and the availability of rapid tests, thus contributing to the achievement of the UN's goal of eliminating AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

METHODS

CAMPAIGN DEVELOPMENT

We are analyzing a student-led public health campaign coordinated by 97 medical students from the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (PUC-Campinas) in 2015, 2018, and 2023. The program encourages local leadership, innovation, and the formation of partnerships with the ultimate goal of contributing to the achievement of one of the core principles of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In collaboration with IFMSA Brazil and the local reference center for HIV and AIDS, the students developed a high-impact program with the following objectives:

- To raise awareness of the importance of HIV testing among adolescents, adults, and pregnant women, encouraging more people to get tested;
- To improve health outcomes by promoting early diagnosis and timely treatment, thereby reducing the transmission and progression of HIV and AIDS;
- Promote comprehensive knowledge and understanding of HIV and AIDS among the target audience, ensuring the dissemination of accurate information;
- Inform students on how to use evidence-based guidelines for HIV screening;
- Demonstrate responsibility by organizing an event in partnership with other students and health professionals, collecting relevant data, and preparing the next generation of students to plan and execute campaigns;
- Provide a space for students to practice dialogue on sensitive topics related to social stigma, encouraging empathy and understanding;
- Advocate for combating the social stigma faced by people living with HIV, promoting inclusion, acceptance, and support;
- Actively participate in Global Health initiatives and contribute to the goals set by IFMSA, strengthening the organization's mission to combat HIV and AIDS on a global scale.

By aligning these goals, the campaign seeks to raise awareness, improve health outcomes, educate the population, combat stigma, and contribute significantly to global health efforts.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

To numerically measure the main objectives of the campaign, a questionnaire (Table 1) was developed to assess participants' knowledge before and after the campaign.

	1	2	3
Are you familiar with the symptoms of AIDS?	1	2	3
After our informative conversation, how would you rate your level of knowledge about rapid HIV testing?	1	2	3
After our informative conversation, how would you rate your level of knowledge about the symptoms of AIDS?	1	2	3

Table 1. Questionnaire to assess the impact of the campaign. Participants were asked to assign a score of 1 (limited knowledge), 2 (intermediate knowledge), or 3 (satisfactory knowledge) both before and after the campaign.

Although there are limitations, the decision to use a concise questionnaire was strategic in order to effectively engage participants and ensure that the questions reflected a basic understanding of the topic. The student volunteers opted for a rating scale of 1 to 3, encouraging participants to reflect more carefully on their level of knowledge, rather than simply marking a binary answer (yes or no), which could be done quickly or even generate pressure for a definitive decision.

Our plan for analyzing the questionnaire data includes the following topics:

- **Data collection**: Responses are collected at two points in time—before and after the informational conversation.
- **Data entry**: After the campaign, student volunteers enter the responses into an Excel spreadsheet.
- **Data coding**: Responses are correctly coded as follows: score 1 (limited knowledge), score 2 (intermediate knowledge), or score 3 (satisfactory knowledge), both before and after the campaign.
- **Data visualization with bar charts**: Table 2 presents bar charts that visually represent the distribution of knowledge levels (1, 2, 3) before and after the campaign.

The questionnaires used by student volunteers to evaluate participants in 2015, 2018, and 2023 followed a similar format, but data collection was carried out in different ways. Specifically, in 2015 and 2018, program participants received printed questionnaires to fill out and return to the students. In 2023, participants accessed the questionnaire via a QR code that directed them to the online version of the questionnaire. There was a significant drop in the response rate in 2023 (from 100% to 10%).

Although the use of paper and pen requires students to take responsibility for storing and subsequently processing responses, we recommend this format for future editions of the campaign due to the substantial difference in the questionnaire return rate.

The switch to an online questionnaire during the 2023 campaign was intended to evaluate the effectiveness of different assessment methods, considering the global scope of our initiative. However, the response rate dropped significantly, and it was noted that many participants likely forgot to submit their responses later. Despite the practicality of digital forms, the traditional paper format proved to be more effective in engaging participants and obtaining responses. By recommending this format for future campaigns, we reinforce the importance of engagement and response rates in evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed actions.

CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

Based on consultations with the HIV and AIDS reference center in Campinas, as well as their own review of the literature, the students developed their own informational pamphlet (Figures 1 and 2) with the aim of presenting the most important information in a concise and accurate manner. All of the content in the pamphlet was addressed in conversations between the student volunteers and campaign participants.

In addition, during the 2018 campaign, participants circulated around the locations carrying posters with the messages: "Today is World AIDS Day" and "I am HIV-positive." With the second poster, the main educational objective was to demonstrate that the chance of contracting HIV by touching an HIV-positive person is the same as touching the poster: none ([3]) .The purpose of this activity was to destigmatize people living with HIV and promote solidarity with them.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The campaign development process began with the formation of a group of five coordinators, one of whom was designated as the lead coordinator. The team's first task was to recruit other student volunteers, using various channels, such as personal invitations and social media.

One of the members of the organizing committee was responsible for scheduling a training session at the local HIV/AIDS reference center for all student volunteers. Clear communication was established to ensure that all volunteers were informed in advance about the scheduled training, for which a messaging group was created with all volunteers.

To ensure active participation in the campaign, all student volunteers, including members of the organizing committee, underwent a one-hour training session at the local HIV/AIDS reference center. This session took place less than a week before the main day of the campaign and provided an opportunity for face-to-face interaction between all participating students. It was also essential for the main coordinator to guide the students on how the campaign would unfold on its main day.

PLANNING

Every year, on December 1, World AIDS Day is celebrated. With th , people around the world come together to show support for people living with HIV/AIDS and to remember those who have died from AIDS-related illnesses [9]. As students, we recognized the opportunity to hold the 2015 and 2018 programs on that same date, December 1st. However, the 2023 campaign took place on May 27th, due to administrative issues specific to that year.

RESEARCH TEAM

The campaign involved 74 student volunteers in 2015, 7 volunteers in 2018, and 16 volunteers in 2023, for a total of 97 volunteers. The volunteers were divided into shifts to deliver informational pamphlets at four different campaign locations: PUC-Campinas Hospital, Parque das Bandeiras Shopping Mall, Taquaral Park, and Campinas Bus Terminal. The choice of locations varied depending on the year. At each action point, the volunteers were organized in pairs.

RESULTS

It can be concluded that student-led public health campaigns increased community knowledge about HIV/AIDS, since most campaign participants rated their knowledge of rapid HIV testing and AIDS symptoms as limited before the campaign and satisfactory after the campaign. We do not reject our main hypothesis: would a student-led public health campaign significantly increase community knowledge about HIV/AIDS symptoms and the availability of rapid tests?

Figure 1. Front of the leaflet used during the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign.

Figure 2. Front of the leaflet used during the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign.

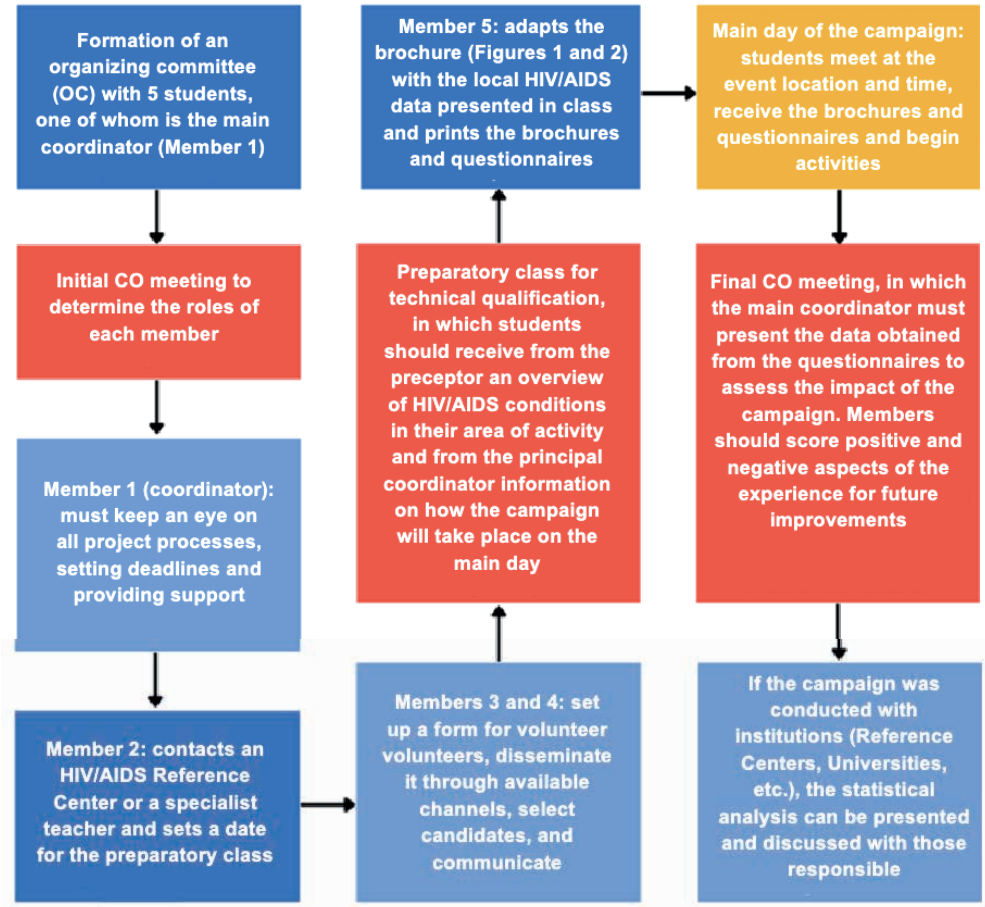

Figure 3. Campaign development process from the first day to the last day. Legend: blue boxes represent members' activities, red boxes represent scheduled meetings (except for the main day), and yellow boxes represent the main day of the campaign.

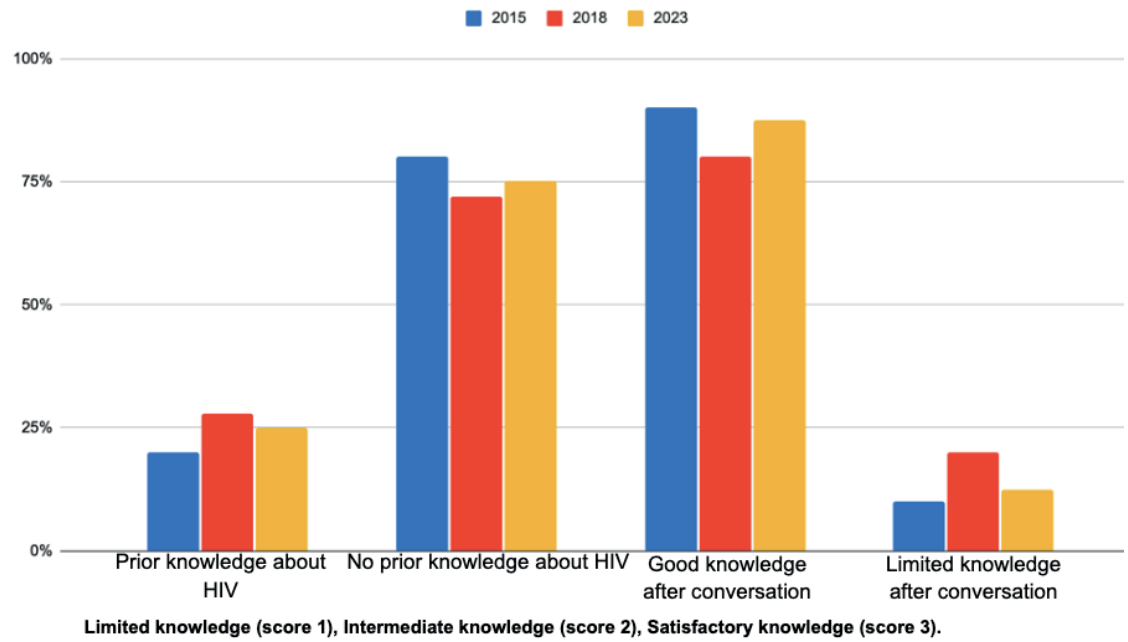

Table 2. Results of questionnaires assessing pre- and post-campaign knowledge about HIV testing and AIDS symptoms in 2015, 2018, and 2023.

All public health campaigns led by medical students from the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (PUC Campinas), conducted in 2015, 2018, and 2023, showed similar results (Table 2). Among the 3,150 individuals approached during these campaigns, the majority demonstrated limited knowledge about HIV testing or AIDS symptoms (78%). These data highlight the significant lack of information on these topics.

However, after the awareness campaign, 88% of these individuals considered their knowledge about rapid testing and AIDS symptoms to be satisfactory. These results demonstrate the positive impact of the campaign on the sponse of our community to HIV and AIDS. In this section, each annual campaign will be described individually, including its results.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that during the activities, no student volunteers received negative comments from the population approached, and all participants engaged in dialogue without prejudice, which was a positive aspect. Consequently, we were able to see how valuable information and dialogue are in this type of action.

When working with public health systems, community responses are fundamental to success and, in this case, to the sustainability of the global response to HIV. There is now widespread recognition that community responses should play an increasingly important role in addressing this disease [13].

It is also known that community engagement leads to greater access to treatment and prevention, such as twice the likelihood of using prevention services and a fourfold increase in consistent condom use [14] . Therefore, we note that replicating this model of activity in other institutions could have a very positive impact on public health education globally.

2015 CAMPAIGN

The 2015 campaign was the largest among those carried out in 2015, 2018, and 2023, covering 2,950 individuals and involving the participation of 74 students. The actions took place at the PUC Campinas Hospital, the Parque das Bandeiras Shopping Mall, and the Campinas Bus Terminal.

After discussions about HIV testing and AIDS symptoms, a questionnaire was administered to all 2,950 participants, assessing their knowledge before and after the students' explanations and educational approaches. Only 20% demonstrated substantial knowledge about the disease before the campaign. The remaining majority had limited or no knowledge about rapid HIV testing or AIDS symptoms. However, 90% considered that, after the informative conversation, they now had satisfactory knowledge on the subject.

2018 CAMPAIGN

In the 2018 campaign, 43 people were approached by seven volunteer medical students. After the informational session, all participants answered a questionnaire that included questions about their prior and subsequent knowledge of HIV symptoms and testing.

Of the 43 individuals, 72% reported having limited or no knowledge about rapid HIV testing or AIDS symptoms before the campaign. After the educational activity, 80% of participants considered that their knowledge about rapid testing and AIDS symptoms had become satisfactory.

2023 CAMPAIGN

During the 2023 campaign, 157 people were approached by 16 volunteer medical students in Taquaral Park. After explanations about HIV testing and AIDS symptoms, participants were invited to answer an online questionnaire about their prior and subsequent knowledge on the subject.

However, only 16 responses were recorded, representing a 90% drop in the response rate compared to the two previous campaigns. It is believed that many participants, who planned to answer the questionnaire on their cell phones during their free time, ended up not completing or submitting their responses.

Of the 16 participants who responded to the questionnaire, only 25% considered their prior knowledge satisfactory, while 75% reported having little knowledge about HIV and AIDS. After the informational campaign, 87.5% stated that their knowledge on the subject had improved.

Although the amount of data analyzed in the 2023 campaign was smaller, it is still possible to reflect on the persistent lack of knowledge among the general population about HIV and AIDS, as well as the positive impact that a student-led public health campaign can have on community education and awareness.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to evaluate the impact of a public health campaign, conducted by medical students, on expanding community knowledge about HIV/AIDS. The hypothesis was that such an intervention would significantly increase the population's understanding of the symptoms of the disease and the availability of rapid tests for HIV detection. The results confirmed this hypothesis, showing a substantial increase in knowledge levels after the campaign. These findings reinforce the effectiveness of student-led public health education initiatives, particularly in resource-limited settings.

In addition to the local impact, the study proposes a more comprehensive goal: to encourage the replication of similar campaigns in medical education institutions in different regions of the world. Student leadership in planning and executing the intervention makes it possible to assess the applicability of the model in different sociocultural contexts, promoting public health education with potential global reach. The reported experience demonstrates that, even in the absence of formal funding, it is possible to develop actions with relevant results, provided there is student engagement and coordination with local health services.

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the data analyzed refer to a single educational institution, which may limit the generalization of the findings. However, it is believed that the model presented can be adapted and integrated into different medical schools, considering local specificities regarding the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and the sociocultural characteristics of the target population.

Second, the project was carried out with the participation of a group of student volunteers linked to IFMSA, which implies a prior alignment of interests with the campaign's objectives. Thus, the experience of these participants may not be representative of the entire student body.

In addition, no formal evaluation of specific outcomes related to student volunteers was conducted. The measurement of such indicators will be essential to guide future implementations of the project in different institutional and geographical contexts.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In future editions of the campaign, we intend to improve the data collection instrument by incorporating questions that more directly assess participants' understanding of the content. Examples include questions such as: "Name three symptoms of AIDS" and "What can be done quickly and free of charge to find out your HIV status?" The inclusion of these questions aims to assess both the know-

ledge assimilated and the level of awareness about the resources available in the public health system. In addition, it is strongly recommended that the questionnaires be answered with pen and paper and not online, as was the case in 2023.

The educational materials also aim to clarify the conceptual distinction between HIV and AIDS, which is essential for effective health communication. Although the current version of the questionnaire was deliberately concise in order to encourage participant engagement, we recognize the importance of developing more robust assessment tools in future cycles of the campaign.

NEXT STEPS

The campaign model presented can be adapted to meet the specific demands of different epidemiological and sociocultural scenarios related to HIV/AIDS. For example, modifications to the informational pamphlets could include information on locations offering free testing, as well as guidance on how to access psychosocial support groups.

To promote the sustainability of the initiative, it is suggested that the campaign be incorporated into the regular activities of local health networks. The flowchart of actions developed in this experience can serve as a model for implementation in other health systems, with students playing an active role in the management of public health interventions.

Finally, although the feasibility of a pilot project has been demonstrated, future quantitative and qualitative evaluations are planned to measure the specific effects of the campaign, both for participating individuals and for the student volunteers involved in the process.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that student-led campaigns promoted engagement with global health advocacy and interprofessional education, while positively impacting society and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Thus, given that there is a gap in the literature on student-led HIV/AIDS campaigns, and this study obtained satisfactory results, these activities may represent a pilot initiative to contribute to both the field of medical education and the field of public health.

DECLARATIONS

ETHICAL APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

All participants were over 18 years of age and voluntarily participated in a conversation with a student volunteer on the last day of the campaign. The only intervention consisted of participating in the conversation and answering a brief questionnaire. No personally identifiable information or confidential health data was collected. The coordination team was committed to ensuring the well-being of participants throughout the campaign. If participation caused discomfort or concern, support mechanisms were available at the local Reference Center, including information on available counseling services.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The materials and data were provided by the authors themselves, who actively participated in the awareness campaign on different dates, and are available upon request to the corresponding author.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

FUNDING

None.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors actively participated in awareness campaigns on different dates, contributed critical reviews, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank all campaign participants, whose knowledge and experience made this study possible. In addition, they recognize the importance of IFMSA Brazil PUC-Campinas as an essential source of public health support within the university (PUC-Campinas), enabling students to develop HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns.

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