EHPSA attended the first two days of the annual meeting of the STD/AIDS Collaborative Research Group in Nairobi.

The group emanates from three-and-a-half decades of collaboration between the University of Nairobi, Kenya and the University of Manitoba, Canada, during which it has focused on a broad range of HIV research topics, from prevention to treatment and care as well as capacity building.

In the early years of the Collaborative Research Group their meetings were billed as 'retreats' where HIV researchers working in Kenya could share their work. This has broadened over the years to involve researchers and associates working in Kenya on HIV and STD related research from many backgrounds and institutions. But importantly the annual meeting has retained its 'unofficial' or 'informal' status, which means that researchers can freely share their envisaged projects as well as early findings and observations without hindering their future publication or abstract presentations in more official settings.

**Collaboration / Capacity Building**

A striking observation when attending the collaborative meeting for the first time is the rich legacy the collaboration has left in terms of the number of Kenyan researchers. Not only have research programmes and activities increasingly involved the cooperation of the Kenyan National AIDS Control Council (NACC) to ensure better alignment with the local research and policy priorities, but the sheer number of Kenyan researchers actively involved and leading HIV / STD research programmes is testimony to a committed and successful collaboration, with a focus on building national capacities. In a discussion with the coordinator of the meeting he put the number of individuals who have benefitted from the programme, and have progressed to principal investigators in Kenyan research studies, in the hundreds.

The participation of the NACC in the meeting also testified to the local ownership of the HIV / STD research agenda in Kenya. This participation and cooperation has led to the publication of a Kenya HIV and AIDS Research Agenda which is fully aligned with the Kenya AIDS Strategic Framework (KASF 2014-2018). There is also now an online database with both completed and current research projects in Kenya. The chairperson of the NACC in the meeting not only reported back on the NACC’s implementation of knowledge management framework, but invited researchers present to increasingly work with the NACC and align their research with the needs identified.

**Ongoing and future research**

It seems that in recent years there has been a renewed focus on implementation science. Although there is still interesting pure science research (in the virological and immunological space) being conducted, there is also now a greater focus on HIV transmission patterns among men who have sex with men (MSM) and a much broader attempt through phylogenetics and mathematical modelling to trace HIV-1 transmission in Kenya.

Various studies reported on their efforts better to understand what it would take to increase testing and linkage to care through the introduction of oral self-testing (OST) both among female sex workers (FSW) and men who have sex with men (MSM), and various studies showed promising results. Presentations regarding work among key populations ranged from economic empowerment for FSW
and related innovative approaches such as art and drama to communicate prevention messages and improve service delivery for key populations (KPs).

Ongoing work among MSM in Kenya ranges from the acceptability and uptake of PrEP and OST to designing appropriate services. The Anza Mapema study – partly funded through EHPSA – reported interesting early findings on declining and changing patterns of STIs as an indicator of risk.

The TRANSITIONS study is looking at HIV risk among young female sex workers and young women engaging in high-risk casual and transactional sex. Key here is how to better understand the transition phases between casual and transactional sex; and between transactional sex and sex work. And more importantly how to use this knowledge to identify risk and vulnerability - and design appropriate interventions and linkages to intervention programmes.

A striking characteristic of all the implementation research presented during the first two days was the specific and determined efforts to work with and through peers and peer organisations. Whether it is peer-led introduction of OST to find undiagnosed HIV, or the art and drama interventions in the Sex Worker Outreach Programme, it is clear that the Kenyan research landscape is being formed and directed increasingly by KPs and their organisations.