

**The Wellcome Trust**  
**Social, Ethics and Public Policy Research on Biomedical Science**

*Research Summary*

**Title:** Universal HIV treatment in an environment of marked social inequalities: An anthropological case study of medical ethics in a low-income neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

**Investigator:** Mr Fabian Cataldo

**Supervisors:** Dr Sophie Day  
Dr Stephen Nugent

**Institution:** Anthropology Department  
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**Type of grant:** PhD Studentship

**Time period (in months):** 36

**Start date:** 1 November 2003

**Background**

Brazil remains one of the four countries with the highest number of HIV/AIDS cases. Since 1996, the National STD/AIDS Programme has uniquely provided universal access to free antiretroviral treatment (HAART): this has changed the course of HIV infection in the country. One of the particularities of the Brazilian programme, unique outside the industrialized nations, is that free treatment is part of a prevention campaign as well as a therapy. This public health policy is now considered a model to follow for other countries in the developing world. This project will study a low-income neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro to assess access to HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention among the poor.

**Aims**

The aim of this project is to understand the broad ethics of the Brazilian STD/AIDS programme, by investigating how it is applied in a low-income population group. Medical ethics have been largely focusing on health policies in industrialized nations; this research will assess the STD/AIDS programme primarily from the perspective of a poor neighbourhood life in Brazil through a qualitative approach.

**Methodology**

The methodology used for this research results from a combination of literature review, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, life histories, narratives of illnesses, and secondary data analysis. The first year (November 2003 – November 2004), will be organized around fieldwork observations in Brazil. This will be followed by two years of data analysis and writing up in the UK.

Primary data will be collected as follows:

- Between November 2003 and January 2004: collection of data through participant observation and interviews with the staff of an NGO whose work is closely related to the STD/AIDS programme in order to understand more specifically the logistical organization to provide access to treatment and prevention.
- From January 2004 to April 2004: interviews with doctors, nurses, and social workers who work in the local medical unit through which the government distributes antiretroviral drugs.
- From January 2004: anthropological fieldwork in a low-income neighbourhood including in-depth follow up of approximately 20 research participants affected or infected by HIV who live there. Interviews, as well as life histories and illness narratives, will be collected with the aim of understanding how individuals access information and treatment through the STD/AIDS programme.

### **Main research questions**

- How are we to understand the broad ethics of this STD/AIDS Programme in the context of marked social inequalities (derived from poverty, gender, class, and education), themselves associated with HIV infection?
- How is the principle of universal access to HIV treatments applied in this particular context by the government and public health authorities, and what is its link to HIV prevention?
- How do people understand the STD/AIDS Programme in this neighbourhood? In particular, what is the impact of visual material on the largely illiterate population?
- How are people living in this specific area tested and treated for HIV? Is the access and treatment comparable to other population groups in Rio (a comparison will be made through available epidemiological and secondary data, especially through the specific NGO and medical centres mentioned above)?

### **Applications of research results**

This research will contribute to our understanding of the ethics of a particular STD/AIDS Programme and help formulate questions about the ethics of interventions more broadly in the light of pervasive global social inequalities. It will contribute to applied anthropology that may assist policymakers in the development and evaluation of equitable policies. It is hoped also that this project will lay the basis for further interdisciplinary research into issues of equity through collaboration, for example, with clinical, epidemiological and economic perspectives.

### **Further information**

If you would like further information about this research please contact:

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