

## **Love in the Time of HIV: Theory and evidence on social stigma and health-seeking behavior**

### **Abstract**

Low levels of HIV testing may be in part due to social stigma. We propose a signalling model of sexual relationships; an individual's decision to test for HIV signals his likelihood of being infected. Stigma emerges as an equilibrium, in that some individuals reject potential sexual partners based on their decision to test for HIV. We implement a randomized experiment in 122 villages in Malawi to provide new information on the public benefit of AIDS treatment. ART drugs reduce HIV transmission by 96%; this fact implies that those who seek an HIV test may in fact be less contagious than previously believed, because this allows them to access treatment. We find that individuals in communities which received information on the public benefit of ART drugs were 62% more likely to test for HIV. High community-level beliefs about the public benefit of ART are associated with a relative shift to nearby testing, and self-reported HIV testing is strongly predicted by one's perception of the community's beliefs. These results suggest that stigma may in part be due to a rational fear of contracting HIV, and providing new information may reduce stigma and increase HIV testing.