# The association between detected drug resistance mutations and CD4 cell decline in HIV-positive individuals maintained on a failing treatment regimen

## [RUNNING HEAD]: HIV drug resistance and CD4 counts

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Word Count: 3785/4000 References: 44 Inserts (Tables and Figures): 5 Appendices: 5 docx files Abstract: 224/250 1 Abstract

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- 4 **Objectives:** To analyse the effect of drug resistance mutations (DRM) on CD4 cell trends in HIV-
- 5 positive people maintained on virologically failing antiretroviral therapy (ART).

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Patient and Methods: Individuals from two large cohorts experiencing virological failure (VF) while
maintained on ART with ≥1 CD4 count and ≥1 resistance test were included. CD4 cell slopes were
estimated using linear mixed models. Principal component analysis (PCA) was used to assess the
effect of clusters of mutations, defined using extracted component based scores from the PCA, on
CD4 cell decline.

- 13 Results: 5,357 individuals contributing 7,661 VF episodes were included: any DRM were detected in 14 88.8% of episodes. After adjustment, CD4 counts declined less steeply during episodes where DRM 15 were detected compared to episodes with no DRM (difference=28 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, 95%Cl=18-39, 16 p<0.001). Among individuals with at least one DRM, we found evidence that any 17 nucleoside/nucleotide reverse-transcriptase inhibitor (NRTI) resistance, the reverse transcriptase 18 (RT) mutations M184V, D67N and T215Y as well as the protease mutations V82A and I54V were 19 associated with reduced CD4 cell declines. The detection of any non-nucleoside reversetranscriptase inhibitor (NNRTI) resistance, the RT mutations V179D and L74V were associated with 20 21 steeper CD4 cell declines. The presence of some mutation patterns similar to the clusters identified 22 by the PCA also affected the CD4 cell decline. 23 24 Conclusion: Detection of resistance and of certain DRM during VF of ART has a small but significant 25 favourable effect on CD4 cell decline.
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- 27 Key Words: Drug Resistance, HIV infection, Viral Fitness, Linear Mixed Models, Principal Component
- 28 Analysis

## 29 Introduction

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31 Despite the success of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in lowering mortality of people living with HIV, 32 some individuals still experience virological failure (VF) on their ART regimen. Given the large 33 number of potential anti-HIV drugs available, an effective second- or third-line salvage regimen 34 consisting of new drugs from different drug classes can generally be prescribed [1]. However, for a 35 minority of individuals it is sometimes difficult to construct a salvage regimen because of extensive 36 and complex resistance patterns or, in resource-limited settings (RLS), because of limited drug availability, infrequent or absent viral load monitoring and a consequent lack of timely switching. In 37 38 these situations, clinicians may be forced to keep individuals on their failing regimen for extended 39 periods of time [2,3].

40

41 Individuals who are kept on a failing ART regimen can still derive clinical benefit from the treatment 42 and may experience stable or increasing CD4 counts despite ongoing viral replication [4-6]. This has 43 been hypothesised to reflect lower replicative capacity of viruses with drug resistance mutations 44 (DRM), particularly for the mutation M184V selected for by lamivudine [7]. However, other factors 45 such as reduced CD4 cell turnover and/or activation [8], the inhibition of CD4 cell apoptosis by 46 protease inhibitors (PI) [9], ineffective replication in the thymus by PI resistant viruses [10] or 47 residual antiviral activity [11] have also been proposed as potential explanations. Although 48 increased CD4 counts despite ongoing viral replication have been observed in several studies [5,12-49 17], only a few large studies have investigated the effect of DRM on CD4 counts [18–20]. We used 50 data from two large European cohorts of HIV-positive people receiving ART to evaluate the 51 association between the detection of DRM and CD4 count changes in the presence of ongoing viral 52 replication.

#### 53 Methods

54

#### 55 Study participants

56 We included individuals from the EuroSIDA cohort [21] and the UK Collaborative HIV Cohort (UK 57 CHIC) Study [22] (with linked resistance data from the UK HIV Drug Resistance Database (UK HDRD) 58 [23]) who had  $\geq 1$  episode of VF (2 or more consecutive viral load (VL) measurements of >50059 copies/mL while remaining on the same ART regimen) who had ≥1 resistance test and ≥1 CD4 count 60 measured during these episodes of VF. Episodes of VF were defined as starting on the date of the 61 first VL measurement >500 copies/mL, and as ending on the date of the first VL measurement ≤500 62 copies/mL or on the date when the ART regimen was changed (defined as either stopping or adding one or more drugs). Participants could contribute multiple episodes of VF, and baseline was defined 63 64 as the date of the first CD4 measurement of each episode.

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### 66 **Exposure and outcome definitions**

We modelled CD4 counts linearly on a raw (i.e. cells/mm<sup>3</sup>) scale. Resistance was classified using the 67 IAS (2015), Stanford (2014), ANRS (2015) and Rega (2013) classification systems. We used the IAS 68 69 list to classify minor PI mutations. Any resistance was defined as the detection of at least 1 DRM in 70 reverse transcriptase (RT) or protease (PR) in either any of the 4 classification systems. Individuals 71 with only minor PR mutations were considered as having no detectable resistance, and we only 72 studied minor PR mutations when these were present with other DRM. The resistance categories 73 that we studied were: nucleoside reverse transcriptase (NRTI) resistance, non-nucleoside reverse 74 transcriptase (NNRTI) resistance, any protease inhibitor (PI) resistance (considering only major 75 mutations) and any PI resistance (considering both major and minor mutations). We also evaluated 76 the effect of individual mutations that were detected in >1% of episodes. Resistance was presumed 77 to be present from the start of the failure episode until the end, irrespective of the point during the 78 episode at which it was detected by the genotypic test.

80 As mutations can co-occur in patterns, we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) to identify clusters of mutations in the RT and PR [24]. The details of the PCA are provided in the 81 82 supplementary materials (S1). For simplicity, and to avoid capturing associations driven by temporal 83 changes to the virus, we did not differentiate between different amino-acid substitutions in the 84 same position for this part of the analysis. To study the effect of DRM clusters on CD4 count changes, we used extracted component-based scores from the PCA. These scores indicate how 85 86 closely an individual's mutation pattern resembles that described by a given cluster. A high score 87 indicates that the individual's mutation pattern is close to that of the cluster. After extracting the scores, we looked at whether individuals with high scores (defined as a score in the highest quartile) 88 89 for a certain cluster had different CD4 count changes compared to those with lower scores.

90

#### 91 Statistical methods

92 We compared CD4 cell slopes estimated using linear mixed models with random intercepts and 93 slopes among individuals with any drug resistance to those without any detected resistance [25,26]. 94 Among those with any resistance, we then evaluated the effect of class of resistance and individual 95 DRM. The effect of PCA-derived scores on CD4 cell slopes was also evaluated among individuals with 96 any resistance. Potential confounders were identified using previous publications and clinical 97 knowledge, and the final model was adjusted for age (categorised into quartiles), hepatitis C status 98 (yes/no/missing), risk group (Men who have sex with men/ Injecting Drug Use/ heterosexual/ other) 99 and subtype (B/Non-B). A summary literature review undertaken before this study is provided in the 100 supplementary materials (S2). We did not adjust for baseline CD4 counts, as this risks introducing 101 bias [27,28]. VL can be considered both as a potential confounder and as a causal pathway variable, 102 as the effect of any mutation on the CD4 cell decline may at least in part be mediated through 103 changes in the VL. For this reason, we conducted step-wise adjustments as follows: 1) Exposure 104 alone, 2) Model 1 + age, hepatitis C status, risk group and subtype and 3) Model 2 + VL. We adjusted

105	for VL as a continuous, time-updated covariate on the $log_{10}$ scale. For the baseline table we also
106	present data on the level of viral suppression. This was estimated by comparing current VL levels
107	with an individual's viral set point, which was defined as the mean of all pre-ART VL measures.
108	
109	We adjusted the p-values derived from the analysis of individual DRM for multiple testing, as these
110	were chosen based on a prevalence threshold and not an a-priori hypothesis. To do this we used the
111	Benjamini-Hochberg procedure for correcting the false discovery rate (FDR) [29], which produces a

112 q-value representing the probability of a significant finding being a false positive. We used a q-value

113 threshold of 0.05 to indicate significant results.

114

## 115 **Results**

116 Characteristics of the study population

117 A total of 5,357 individuals contributing 7,661 VF episodes were included in the analyses; 2,757 118 (36%) from EuroSIDA and 4,904 (64%) from UK CHIC. Individuals experienced a median of 1 119 (range=1-9) VF episodes, which lasted for a median of 5 (inter-quartile range [IQR]=2-13) months 120 and contained a median of 3 (IQR=2-5) CD4 measurements. The characteristics of the population at 121 the start of each episode can be seen in the supplementary materials, S3. Although 15.6% of 122 episodes occurred while individuals were on mono/dual therapy, the majority occurred while 123 individuals were in receipt of more than 3 drugs. The most common type of cART was NNRTI based (19.8%). 56% of episodes occurred while individuals were receiving lamivudine. The second most 124 125 common drug was tenofovir (30%) followed by indinavir (33%). 1,338 different combinations of 126 drugs were used, the most common being zidovudine, lamivudine and nevirapine. A description of 127 all drugs utilised can be found in the supplementary materials (S4).

128

129 Any resistance was detected in 6,804/7,661 episodes (88.8%). The prevalence of any NRTI resistance 130 was 68.0%, any NNRTI resistance 58.2% and any PI resistance (excluding minor PI mutations) 51.0%. 131 The prevalence of the 55 distinct RT mutations and 64 PI mutations that were detected at a 132 frequency of more than 1% can be seen in **Figure 1**. There were some differences in host and viral 133 characteristics between episodes where resistance was detected compared to episodes where it was 134 not (Supplementary materials, S3). Notably, episodes with no resistance had higher baseline viral 135 load values (p<0.001). The baseline viral load values were also more likely to be higher than set-136 point estimates in episodes with no detected resistance (p<0.001). However, there was only very 137 weak evidence suggesting a difference in CD4 counts measured at the start of episodes (p=0.05).

138	CD4 count changes over time and according to the detection of any and class resistance
139	In univariable analysis, the estimated CD4 cell decline during episodes of VF was 20 cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year
140	(95%CI=-22;-17) in the entire population. CD4 cell declines were less steep (although still notable)
141	when time-updated VL levels were below pre-ART set-point values (p=0.008; data not shown).
142	Figure 2 shows the estimated difference in annual CD4 cell decline according to the detection of any
143	and class of resistance. CD4 counts declined less rapidly during episodes where drug resistance was
144	detected compared to episodes where resistance was not detected, with an estimated difference of
145	28 (18-39) cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year (-17 [-20; -15] v -46 [-56; -36]) cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year, interaction p<0.001).
146	These findings persisted after adjustment for the pre-specified confounders (difference=28 [17-39]
147	cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year, p<0.001) and after further adjustments for VL (difference=32 [21-42]
148	cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year, p<0.001, Figure 2).
149	
150	Among individuals with detected drug resistance, CD4 counts declined less rapidly during episodes
151	where NRTI resistance was detected compared to episodes where NRTI resistance was not detected
152	(-15 (-18; -12) v -40 (-48; -33) cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year, interaction p<0.001). Adjustment for pre-specified
153	confounders and VL did not change the difference in CD4 cell slopes between those with and
154	without NRTI resistance markedly (difference=27 [18-35] and 28 [20-37] cells/mm <sup>3</sup> /year
155	respectively, Figure 2). There was also evidence that CD4 counts declined faster during episodes
155 156	respectively, <b>Figure 2</b> ). There was also evidence that CD4 counts declined faster during episodes where NNRTI resistance was detected in both univariable analyses (-22 (-26; -19) v -10 (-15; -5)

157 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, interaction p<0.001) and after both adjustments (**Figure 2**).

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There was no evidence to suggest that CD4 cell decline differed according to the detection of PI resistance including minor PI mutations (Error! Reference source not found. **2**). However, there was some weak evidence suggesting that CD4 cell decline was less steep during episodes where major PI mutations were detected, both in univariable (difference=6 (-1-12) cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, p=0.07) and

multivariable models (difference=7 (1-14) cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, p=0.02 in model 1, difference= 6 (-0; 12)
cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, p=0.05 in model 2).

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#### 166 The effect of specific DRM on CD4 count changes

167 The difference in CD4 cell decline between episodes with and without a given RT mutation after

adjustment for pre-specified confounders is shown in **Figure 3**. After correcting for multiple testing,

the strongest association was found for M184V, with episodes where M184V was detected

170 experiencing somewhat less steep CD4 cell declines (difference= 17 (11-23) cells/mm3/year,

171 q<0.001). These findings did not change markedly after additional adjustment for VL (difference=16

172 (10-21) cells/mm3/year, q<0.001, Supplementary Materials, S5). There was also reasonable

173 evidence that the T215Y and D67N mutations were associated with less steep CD4 cell declines both

before (difference=11 (5-17) and 11 (5-17) respectively, both p=0.012) and after (difference=10 (4-

175 16) and 12 (6-17), q=0.019 and 0.003 respectively) adjustment for VL. One NNRTI mutation, V179D,

176 was associated with steeper CD4 declines, although the confidence intervals surrounding this finding

were very wide (difference=-44 (-69; -19) cells/mm3/year, q=0.012, **Figure 3**). There was also some

178 very weak evidence (q=0.05) suggesting that those with the L74V mutation experienced somewhat

179 steeper CD4 declines, but the evidence supporting this finding disappeared upon adjustment for VL

180 (Supplementary Materials, S5).

181

Of the PI mutations studied, 2 remained associated with a less steep CD4 decline after correction for multiple testing: V82A and I54V (**Figure 4**). The strongest association was found for the V82A mutation, where CD4 decline was estimated to be 18 (10-25) cells/mm3/year less steep during episodes where the mutation was detected compared to episodes without the mutation (q<0.001). CD4 decline was also 13 (5-20) cells/mm3/year less steep during episodes where I54V was detected (q=0.015). Again, further adjustment for VL did not change these conclusions or shift the point estimates notably (Supplementary Materials, S5).

#### 189 Clusters of mutations

190 The PCA analysis identified five RT and two PR clusters. The process by which they were selected is 191 described in more detail in the Supplementary Materials (S1). Briefly, the first three RT clusters 192 corresponded roughly to the TAM mutations (RT codons 210, 41, 215, 219, 67, 70 plus 44, and 118), 193 the 151M complex (RT codons 151, 116, 77and 75 and weakly, 65 and 62) and the TAM-2 pathway 194 (RT codons 70, 219 and weakly, 67). The fourth RT cluster consisted primarily of substitutions at 195 positions 74, 221 and 181 and the fifth cluster of substitutions at positions 101, 103 and 225. Of the 196 two PR clusters, the first consisted primarily of major PI mutations (codons 46, 48, 54, 58, 82, 84 and 197 90) with some minor PI mutations (codons 10, 24, 33, 53, 64, 71and 73) which represented broad PI 198 resistance. The second PI cluster consisted of 4 minor PI mutations (codons 20, 36, 69 and 89) which 199 are common in non-B subtypes, with some weak contributions from substitutions in position 16 and 200 15.

201

#### 202 The effect of mutation clusters on CD4 count changes

203 The effect of the mutation clusters on CD4 count changes are shown in Error! Reference source not 204 found.. Individuals with scores in the highest quartile of the 3rd RT cluster (weakly corresponding to 205 TAM-2 mutations) experienced reduced CD4 cell declines (difference=9 (2-16) cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, 206 p=0.007), as did individuals with scores in the highest quartile of the 1<sup>st</sup> PI cluster, which represented 207 broad PI resistance (difference=14 (7-20) cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, p<0.001). Individuals with scores in the highest quartile of the 5<sup>th</sup> RT cluster, which included K103N, experienced steeper CD4 cell declines 208 209 (difference=-9 (-16; -3) cells/mm<sup>3</sup>/year, p=0.007) compared to individuals with lower scores on this 210 component. There was also some very weak evidence that scores in the highest quartile of the 1<sup>st</sup> RT 211 cluster, which included the TAM-1 mutations, were associated with somewhat reduced CD4 cell 212 declines (p=0.03).

214

## 215 **Discussion**

216 Although the aim of HIV treatment should always be to suppress the VL to undetectable levels, there 217 is a minority of patients with extensive resistance or without access to any other drug options for 218 whom this is not possible. Composing a salvage regimen for these individuals presents a particular 219 challenge, and it has long been debated whether including drugs that preserve resistance patterns 220 associated with lower viral fitness may provide some clinical benefit [4,6,30]. In this analysis, we 221 found that among individuals maintained on a failing treatment regimen, CD4 counts declined less 222 rapidly during episodes in which resistance was detected compared to episodes where resistance 223 was not detected. DRM detection can serve as a proxy for ongoing ART pressure and at least partial 224 antiviral activity, whereas the absence of DRM can indicate high levels of non-adherence. VF 225 episodes with no detected DRM had much higher baseline VL levels in addition to more rapid CD4 226 cell decline, which supports the hypothesis that those individuals without DRM may not be taking 227 their ART. When restricting the analyses to episodes with any detected resistance, CD4 counts 228 decreased less steeply during episodes of virological failure where any NRTI resistance, the RT 229 mutations M184V, D67N and T215Y and either of the PR mutations V82A and I54V were detected. 230 CD4 counts declined more steeply during episodes with detected NNRTI resistance, as well as the RT 231 mutations V179D and, marginally, L74V.

232

It has been suggested that differences in CD4 cell decline according to the presence of certain DRM could reflect differences in the replicative capacity of the virus [31]. The M184V mutation in the reverse transcriptase has been frequently shown to adversely impact replicative capacity [32–35], and the T215Y mutation has been associated with an impaired RC [35,36]. In contrast, D67N has been found to have relatively high RC [31,36]. The V82A mutation has been reported to negatively impact the functionality of the viral protease which could lead to a lower RC [37]. However, adjustment for VL, which is associated with the replicative capacity of a virus [14], did not affect the

conclusions or the size of the CD4 cell decline markedly in this analysis. Although this could indicate
that the effects described here are not being mediated through viral load changes, a model
adjusting for a mediating variable often fails to accurately estimate the total direct effect of the
exposure on the outcome [38–40]. It is possible that adjusting for time-updated VL has not removed
the effect that might be mediated through this variable, and this limitation should be born in mind
when interpreting the results.

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247 The results from studying clusters of mutations indicated that episodes where the mutation pattern broadly aligned with TAM-2 mutations or the broad PI resistance described by the 1<sup>st</sup> PI cluster had 248 less steep CD4 cell declines. Although the TAM-2 mutations D67N, K70R and K219Q have relatively 249 250 low fitness costs when present alone [31], the presence of K70R has been shown to result in 251 reduction in fitness when it emerges in viruses carrying both D67N and K219Q in the absence of drug 252 pressure [41]. Such a combined effect may also explain why the detection of each of these 3 253 mutations individually resulted in less steep CD4 cell declines, although only significantly so for the 254 D67N mutation after correcting for multiple testing. The impact of PI resistance on replicative 255 capacity is complex to predict as these mutations may be accompanied by compensatory PI 256 mutations that can restore viral fitness [31]. However, it is possible that the first PI cluster could 257 capture the effect of a number of major PI mutations which, when present in combination, could be 258 associated with favourable CD4 cell changes. We also found weak evidence that the fourth RT 259 cluster was associated with steeper CD4 cell declines. The mutations that formed part of this cluster 260 include K103N and L100I, both of which have been shown to have a very small fitness cost [31]. 261 262 Previous studies of the effect of drug resistance on CD4 cell changes have found conflicting results. A

previous randomised trial, COLATE, which evaluated continuation versus discontinuation of
lamivudine in individuals with VF as compared to other cART in order to study the effect of

265 preserving the M184V/I mutation, failed to demonstrate a virological or immunological benefit of

266 continuing lamivudine [30]. The authors suggested that this could be due to the high GSS of the 267 switch regimens, which could be masking any potential benefits. An earlier pilot trial (E-184V) 268 reported a benefit of lamivudine monotherapy compared to treatment interruption in treatment 269 experienced patients on HAART requesting a treatment interruption, and suggested that these 270 benefits are in part due to the preservation of M184V [6]. Recently presented results from the 271 MOBIDIP/ ANRS 12286 trial have also shown a marked clinical benefit of using lamivudine in 272 combination with a boosted PI compared to the use of a boosted PI alone as a simplification strategy 273 for patients with a suppressed VL on second line therapy [42]. The findings from observational 274 studies have also been conflicting. In broad agreement with the findings presented here, a recent 275 analysis by Hoffman et al of a large cohort of people living with HIV from South Africa found that 276 CD4 counts declined less rapidly during episodes of persistent viraemia where M184V was detected, 277 although not significantly so (p=0.1) [43]. A study by Antinori et al in 2001 found that both M184V 278 and V82A were associated with immunological recovery despite ongoing viral replication in 279 univariable analyses, but not after adjustments for confounders including VL [20]. This is similar to 280 results reported by Gianotti et al, who found no associations between individual mutations in the 281 pol gene region and the odds of discordant immuno-virological responses when studying 825 282 individuals from the large ARCA database in Italy [19].

283

284 There are several important limitations of our findings. Firstly, we did not have a validated measure 285 of adherence available, which unfortunately meant that we were not able to adjust for poor 286 adherence. Adherence has the potential to be an important confounder in this analysis, as it is likely 287 to influence both the presence of resistance and CD4 cell decline [44]. Although sensitivity analyses 288 where we excluded individuals with potentially poor adherence based on their VL trajectories led to 289 consistent results (data available on request), it is possible that this did not accurately identify poorly 290 adherent individuals. Secondly, many different drug combinations were used to treat individuals in 291 this study, and it was not possible to study the effect of individual regimens. Although adjustment

292 for current VL should remove the effect of residual antiviral activity exerted through the VL, we 293 cannot rule out that some of the different regimens used exerted some residual antiviral activity 294 that could explain some of the findings. Although we conducted sensitive analyses where we 295 adjusted for the class of drug received which showed consistent results (results available within the 296 supplementary materials, S4), we cannot rule out that adjustment for the specific regimen received 297 would produce different results due to the presence of residual confounding in our study. Future 298 studies conducted in other settings may have greater homogeneity in the types of regimens used, 299 and in these situations it would be of great interest to repeat the analyses stratified by the type of 300 regimen received. In addition, we cannot rule out that the results would differ in settings where 301 other subtypes predominate. Repeating the analyses within cohorts with a higher prevalence of non-302 B subtypes would be of great interest. Finally, despite using combined data from two large cohorts, 303 the relatively low prevalence of individual mutations means that some of our estimates, particularly 304 for rare mutations, suffer from low precision.

305

306 Bearing these limitations in mind, our findings provide some support for the hypothesis that CD4 cell 307 decline may be less marked when individuals experiencing VF are maintained on regimens that 308 preserve specific mutations that have previously been associated with reduced viral fitness. This 309 could have implications for individuals in RLS who have failed all existing available lines, and suggests 310 that in these instances the inclusion of lamivudine/emtricitabine and a boosted PI may be the best 311 option in terms of composing a salvage regimen. However, the likely effect of the presence of a 312 particular mutation on annual CD4 cell decline is likely to be relatively small and complex to predict 313 due to the presence of epistatic interactions and potentially confounding effects which are hard to 314 measure, such as residual drug action and adherence. Further research is needed to evaluate the 315 clinical benefits of specific treatment strategies that aim to preserve particular resistance patterns 316 among individuals for whom a potent ART regimen cannot be prescribed, as well as to elucidate the 317 mechanisms through which any beneficial effect is mediated. Until then, efforts should focus on

- 318 ensuring that those who experience VF have access to individualised care and a broad range of
- antiretroviral drugs, and, where possible, novel ART drugs through compassionate early access
- 320 programs to allow the construction of fully suppressive regimens.

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