

WHAT'S IN THIS
ISSUE:

JAN - APRIL UPDATES

RHSP PUBLICATIONS

THE RHSP NEWSLETTER

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF RAKAI HEALTH SCIENCES PROGRAM



RHSP staff and collaborators gather for a group photo at the 2025 CROI Conference.

RHSP SHOWCASES HIV RESEARCH AT CROI 2025

The Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) proudly presented its latest research findings at the 32nd Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI), held from March 9-12, 2025, at the Moscone Convention Center in San Francisco.

As one of the premier global scientific gatherings, CROI brought together thousands of researchers, clinicians, and public health professionals to discuss the latest advancements in HIV, SARS-CoV-2, and Mpox.

RHSP was well represented by a team of distinguished scientists, contributing impactful studies and fostering new global collaborations.

Oral Presentations



Picture a: Dr. Gertrude Nakigozi, Griffin Bell and Silas Odiya at the CROI conference.

Picture b: Dr. Josep Greg Rosen sharing his oral presentation at the CROI conference.

Picture c: Silas Odiya sharing his oral presentation at the CROI conference.

RHSP SCIENTIFIC HIGHLIGHTS AT #CROI2025

Silas Odiya

Most with HIV Viremia Are Not in Care Despite High ART Coverage: A Population-Based Study in Uganda.

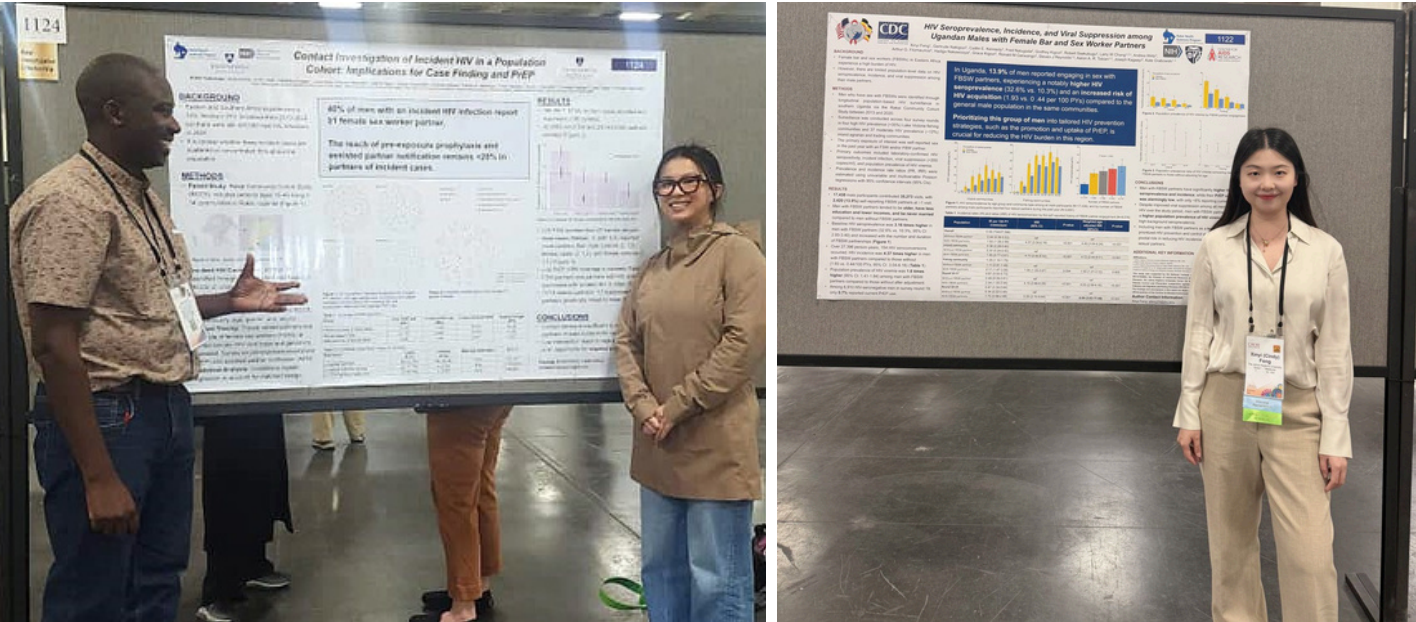
- The presentation revealed gaps in care linkage among viremic individuals despite widespread ART availability.

Joseph (Greg) Rosen

• Clinic Switching and Elevated HIV Viral Load in 6 African Countries: A Population-Based Study.

- It highlighted how care transitions may contribute to viral rebound, with implications for continuity of care.

Poster Presentations



On the left, Robert Ssekubugu sharing his poster presentation. On the right, Xinyi Feng with her poster presentation.

Robert Ssekubugu

- **Contact Investigation of Incident HIV in a Population Cohort: Implications for Case Finding and PrEP**
 - a. “Utilization of Assisted Partner Notification Services and Outcomes: A Population-Based Study”
- Showed innovative approaches to case finding and maximizing the impact of partner notification services.

Michael A. Martin

- **Population-Based Longitudinal Dynamics of HIV Drug Resistance During Dolutegravir Roll-Out in Uganda.**
- Tracked emerging resistance trends, informing ART program adjustments.

Xinyi Feng

- **HIV Incidence and Viral Suppression Among Ugandan Males with Female Bar and Sex Worker Partners.**
- Raised alarms about high-risk sexual networks and the need for inclusive PrEP programming.

Hadijja Nakawooya

- **The Impact of Partner Notification Services on HIV Testing and PrEP Uptake in High-Burden Populations in South Central Uganda.**
- Emphasized how targeted strategies can boost testing and PrEP use in vulnerable communities.

Advancing collaborations

Beyond research presentations, RHSP scientists engaged in strategic discussions, strengthening partnerships with leading global health experts. The conference provided a platform to exchange knowledge, explore new research opportunities, and align efforts toward ending the HIV epidemic.

UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE SHOCK IN RURAL UGANDA: A COLLABORATIVE SURVEY WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



Andrea Mahieu (left), Dr Gertrude Nakigozi (center) Ugandan Principal Investigator and Grace Kigozi (right) Quality Control team lead facilitating a training session.

In a rapidly changing climate, understanding how rural communities adapt to extreme weather events is more crucial than ever. The Uganda Climate Shock Survey, a collaborative effort between the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) and the University of Michigan, aims to shed light on the resilience and coping mechanisms of communities in South-Central Uganda.

This research is spearheaded by investigators Pamela Jagger, Joseph Eisenberg, and Gertrude Nakigozi, with a specific focus on how households respond to shifting weather patterns, natural disasters such as flooding, and broader environmental challenges. The study will also validate the climate shock survey tool for this region, ensuring that future research is informed by robust, context-specific data.

A community centered approach

The survey targets 400 randomly selected households within the Rakai Community Cohort Study (RCCS) communities, with an equal split between fishing and agrarian populations. By analyzing differences in adaptation strategies across these distinct groups, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into the region's climate resilience.

Building strong research foundations

Before launching the survey, Andrea Mahieu facilitated a five-day training session that covered protocol review, questionnaire refinement, and field pretesting. This preparatory work ensures that the data collected is accurate, relevant, and methodologically sound.



Andrea Mahieu (center) with some of the RHSP staff who attended the five day training.

Prof Joseph Kolars visits RHSP

On February 28, 2025, RHSP also had the privilege of hosting Prof. Joseph (Joe) Kolars, Director of the University of Michigan Center for Global Health Equity. Prof. Kolars' visit was instrumental in assessing the progress of the ongoing climate collaboration, facilitating funding for the study, and identifying new opportunities for partnership between the two institutions.

As climate variability continues to pose significant challenges to rural livelihoods, studies like this provide critical evidence to inform policy and intervention strategies. The findings from this survey will not only benefit Ugandan communities but also contribute to the global discourse on climate adaptation and resilience.



Pictorial: (Top left) Prof. Kolars takes a group picture with the RHSP team. (Bottom left) Dr. Gertrude and Margret Nakalanzi (Lab manager) give Prof Kolars a tour of the RHSP lab. (Right) Professors, Nelson Ssewankambo and Joseph Kolars visit a school located in one of the communities participating in the climate shock survey.

RHSP AND MU-JHU EXPLORE AREAS FOR RESEARCH COLLABORATION



Group image of MU-JHU team member and RHSP staff members posing for photo at RHSP Headquarter reception.



(Left to right) Professors Aaron Tobian, Mary Glenn Fowler, Phillipa Musoke, and Motevalli Mahrez during a meeting with the RHSP team discussing potential partnership

RHSP hosted a distinguished team from MU-JHU Care LTD | MU-JHU Research Collaboration, including Professors Phillipa Musoke, Motevalli Mahrez, Mary Glenn Fowler, and Aaron Tobian. The visit provided a valuable opportunity to strengthen ties between the two institutions and explore new areas of collaboration in the upcoming research cycle.

Discussions focused on expanding research efforts beyond HIV/AIDS to address other pressing health challenges within the communities we serve. By leveraging RHSP's extensive community-based experience and MU-JHU's expertise, both teams aim to drive impactful health innovations that improve lives.

During their visit, the MU-JHU team engaged with various RHSP departments, gaining firsthand insight into ongoing research, field operations, and strategic approaches developed over the past three decades. These discussions highlighted opportunities for joint projects and knowledge exchange to enhance health outcomes.

This visit reaffirmed the commitment of both institutions to advancing global health research and delivering high-impact healthcare solutions. Strengthening this collaboration marks an important step toward expanding research capabilities and making a lasting difference in public health.

RHSP WELCOMES PARTNERS FROM COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY AND CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



From January 13-17, partners and researchers from Columbia University (CU), New York, and City University of New York (CUNY), including investigators and senior scientists, visited RHSP.

The CU and CUNY team included Professors Santelli John and Mary Ott, Drs. Philip Kreniske, Debbie Malden, and Kirsty. Holly Isenberg from CUNY School of Public Health and Prof. Susie Hoffman from Columbia University attended virtually.

Image above: Prof David Sserwada, Dr. Fred Nalugoda, Dr. Phil Kreniske, Rebecca Kakembo during the meeting discussions.

Image below: CAB member sharing during the ICARE and ROC discussion.

During the visit, RHSP scientists and researchers, including Drs. Godfrey Kigozi, Gertrude Nakigozi, Tom Lutalo, Fredrick Makumbi, Fred Nalugoda, Prof. Nelson Sewankambo, and David Serwadda, discussed various issues related to study progress for the Rakai Orphans in the Communities (ROC) and Improving understanding of Capacity to consent to sensitive biomedical Research among adolescents in Rakai Uganda (ICARE) projects.

Representatives from the Rakai Community Cohort Study (Robert Ssekubugu), Data Management and Biostatistics (Absalom Ssettuba, Anthony Ndyanabo), Social and Behavioral Sciences (William Ddaaki, Dauda Isabirye, Rosette Nakubulwa, and Neema Nakyanjo (Virtual attendance)), and Community Outreach (Dr Robert Kairania, Eric Sebanyiga, and Ivan Kisitu) departments were also present.

Key discussions included the specific aims and implementation of the studies, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and ongoing challenges.





Some of the CAB members during the meeting with the teams from Columbia University and CUNY.

Amplifying adolescent voices in research

A special Community Advisory Board (CAB) meeting was convened, where members discussed ways to enhance youth representation in research, health literacy among adolescents and guardians, and strategies for identifying orphanages in the district.

The meeting also explored new research ideas and funding opportunities, including the Kirsty's K03 research questions, impact of COVID-19 on Ugandan youth, the StrongMinds mental health evaluation, and the PATH initiative focused on improving access to testing and healthcare.

Looking Ahead

The visit reaffirmed the shared commitment to advancing research that directly benefits communities. By fostering collaboration and exploring new areas of study, RHSP and its partners continue to drive innovation in global health.

USING SPORTS TO STRENGTHEN HEALTH EDUCATION: HOW RHSP REACHES COMMUNITIES



The football teams entering the pitch for the tournament finals in Kyotera District.

At the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP), the Health Education and Community Mobilization (HECM) team has long recognized that effective community engagement requires creativity, trust, and local relevance. One of the most dynamic ways they're achieving this is through sports—specifically, football tournaments organized within the communities RHSP serves.

These tournaments serve as carefully planned platforms for health education, research dissemination, and community mobilization.

Disseminating research findings through play

The HECM team ensures that findings from RHSP's research—particularly the Rakai Community Cohort Study (RCCS)—are transparently and accurately shared with the very communities that contribute to these studies. Football events offer a natural gathering point, enabling the team to communicate the upcoming studies, findings and available services in a setting that is informal, participatory, and trusted.

Preparing communities for health services

As football brings people together, it also creates the opportunity to inform them about the range of services RHSP offers. This ensures better understanding, uptake, and continued use of these essential services.



Eric Sebanyiga, team leader HECM engaging community members in Kyotera District.

Changing perceptions, creating community

Namuwonge Rosette, an RHSP mobilizer from Kigenya village, Kyotera District has been at the heart of these efforts since 1995 narrates:

“I started working as a mobilizer when I was still very young. We were elected by our communities,” she recalls. “Back then, we used only drama, films, and teachings. Netball was more common. But when we saw other communities introducing girls’ football, we decided to try it in our communities too.” she narrates.

The first games were challenging since a few girls participated but things quickly changed.

Football tournaments have helped challenge long-held beliefs about gender and sports. "Some community members couldn't believe that girls could play football so well. However, today they are the biggest advocates," says Namuwonge Rosette,

"Growing up, I always played football at school," says 22-year-old Nassali Lillian. "My brothers were my biggest inspiration. So, when the village mobilizers invited me to join the local girls' team, I was thrilled. Being on the pitch makes me feel truly alive—it's where I feel most like myself."

"Playing brings me so much joy—but it's more than just the games," says 21-year-old Nakyanzi Winnie. Through the team, she has gained valuable health education, but more importantly, she has found a supportive community—one that celebrates each other's wins and stands together through life's challenges.



Eric Sebanjiga , Ivan Kisitu and Jude Ssempijja during the awarding ceremony of the final teams.

RHSP staff engage in community sports



Part of the RHSP staff football team lineup preparing at the Nabbunga playground in Kalisizo.

In another exciting wave of community engagement, RHSP has participated in a series of football matches with secondary schools and partner organizations within Kyotera District. These tournaments are part of our broader strategy to promote wellness, strengthen relationships, and support youth development through sport.

The matches have drawn enthusiastic participation from RHSP staff, who have taken to the field with energy and pride, representing the organization's commitment to teamwork and healthy living.

Sport as a Catalyst for Health and Empowerment

Through football, RHSP is engaging communities and transforming how health and research are delivered. It's health education that's joyful, inclusive, and lasting.

ORAL HEALTH RESEARCH IN RAKAI

Following last year's successful community engagement sessions, Dr. Abbas Jessani from the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, Western University, has returned to Rakai. In collaboration with the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP), he is advancing efforts to address critical oral health disparities.

This time, the study team is conducting dental checks on participants at Ddimu landing site and in Kyotera District. These visits are a crucial step in ensuring continuity of care, monitoring oral health outcomes, and reinforcing the importance of integrating oral health into routine healthcare services.

The dental medical camps offer check-ups, treatments, and oral health education to participants initially engaged during community outreach sessions. The team's return has been warmly received, with many community members expressing gratitude for the focus on oral health—an area that has long been underserved.

"We've seen severe dental decay and extensive tooth loss. Oral health is often neglected in these communities—not because it's unimportant, but because families prioritize school fees, shelter, and food," Dr. Jessani shared. "We understand that. That's why we're here. People have a lot of challenges knowing what good oral hygiene looks like, general health, and a good diet."



Oral health team at the Ddimu landing site conducting dental checks on participants.



As we move forward, the team remains committed to shaping sustainable and community-centered oral health programs, guided by the valuable insights and needs expressed by the communities themselves. This effort marks another meaningful step toward reducing oral health disparities and promoting a healthier future for all.

Dr. Jessani emphasized the significance of addressing oral health gaps, stating, "The needs are clear, and so is the path forward. With a systematic and evidence-based approach, the study team will tackle the most common oral diseases identified through the data."

This study will help to reshape how communities view oral health, not as a luxury, but as an essential part of their overall well-being.



Picture above: A study participant going through the consenting process

Picture below: A study participant during the check up.

RHSP RECOGNIZED FOR EXCELLENCE



The RHSP Human Resource team (Joan Nankya and Sharon Murungi) receiving the award from the NSSF team.

NSSF rewards RHSP

RHSP was among the top compliant companies in the South Central region in Uganda recognized by the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) for our commitment to compliance and timely contributions.

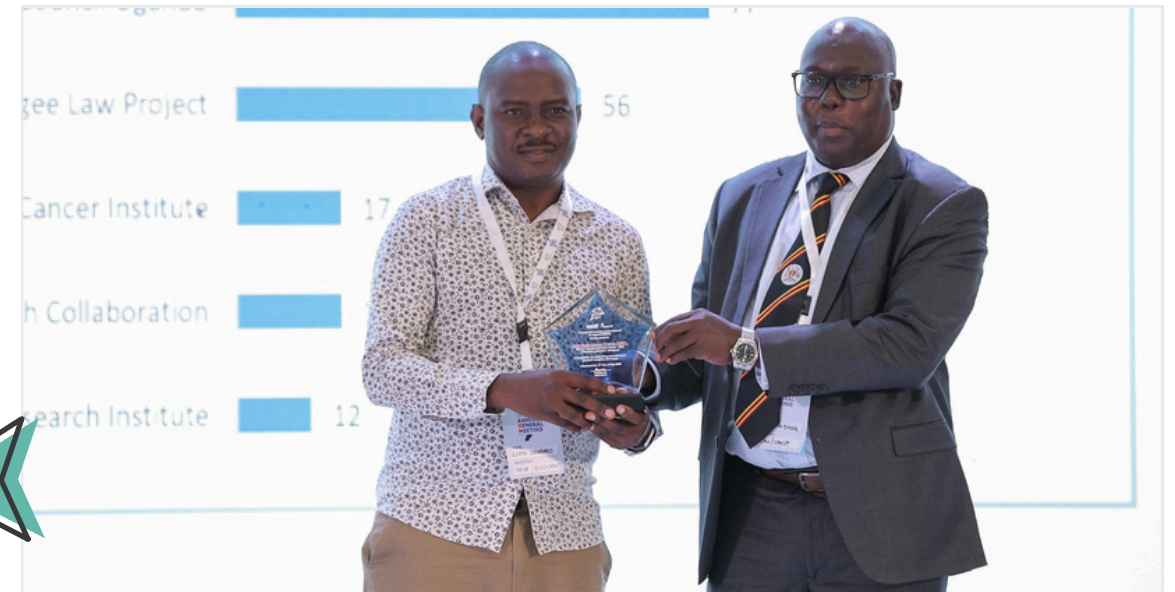
A heartfelt thank you to NSSF for this recognition and for promoting a culture of accountability and social security. Congratulations to all the other organizations acknowledged—we remain committed to upholding best practices in employee welfare.

RHSP Recognized as Top eduroam User at RENU AGM

At the RENU Annual General Meeting held on May 2, 2025, Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) was honored as the top eduroam user in the Research Institutions category.

This recognition highlights RHSP's dedication to staying digitally connected and fostering collaboration in research and innovation.

We thank the Research and Education Network for Uganda (RENU) for this honor and for their continued support in advancing research through secure and reliable connectivity.



Llyod Ssentongo, Head of I.T receiving the award on behalf of RHSP.




RHSP LAB MOVES FORWARD IN GLOBAL STANDARDS WITH ISO 15189:2022 ACCREDITATION RECOMMENDATION



The Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) Laboratory continues to set new benchmarks in medical excellence. Following a successful assessment by the South African National Accreditation System (SANAS), the RHSP Laboratory has been recommended for accreditation under the ISO 15189:2022 standard—a globally recognized certification for quality and competence in medical laboratories.

A commitment to excellence

This recommendation is more than just a technical milestone—it validates RHSP’s unwavering dedication to delivering high-quality, reliable, and patient-centered diagnostic services that meet international standards.

The ISO 15189:2022 standard places greater emphasis on:  Risk management—strengthening laboratory processes to minimize errors.  Quality improvement—enhancing performance through continuous monitoring.  Patient outcomes—ensuring diagnostics lead to better healthcare solutions.

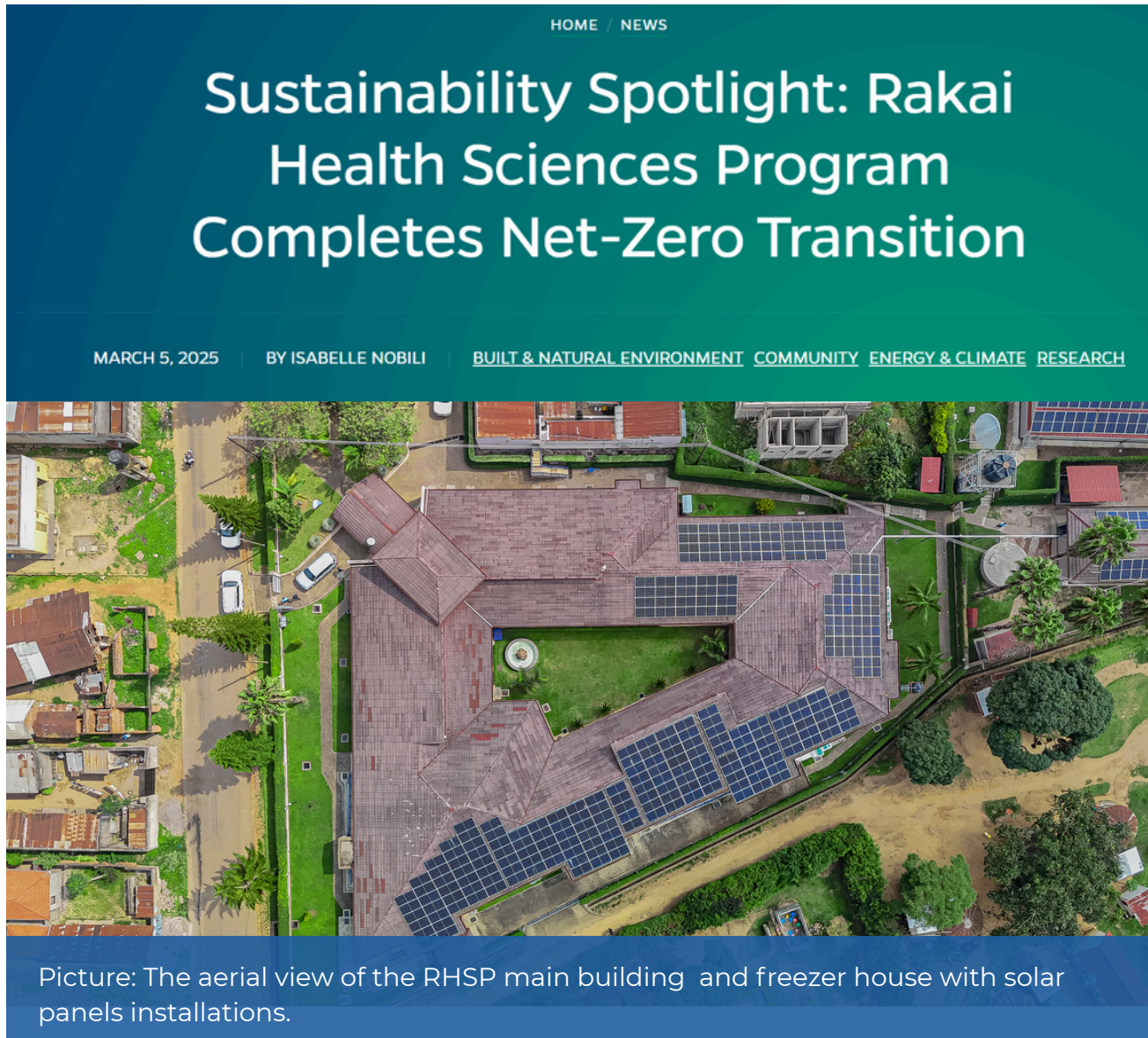
Raising the bar in laboratory medicine

This accreditation recommendation confirms that the RHSP Laboratory operates with precision, integrity, and a commitment to continuous improvement—aligning with best practices across the global healthcare and research landscape.

As RHSP advances its mission of improving health through research, this achievement reinforces its position as a leader in medical diagnostics and innovation.

Insert: A copy of the previous SANAS certificate awarded to RHSP.

RHSP GOES NET-ZERO



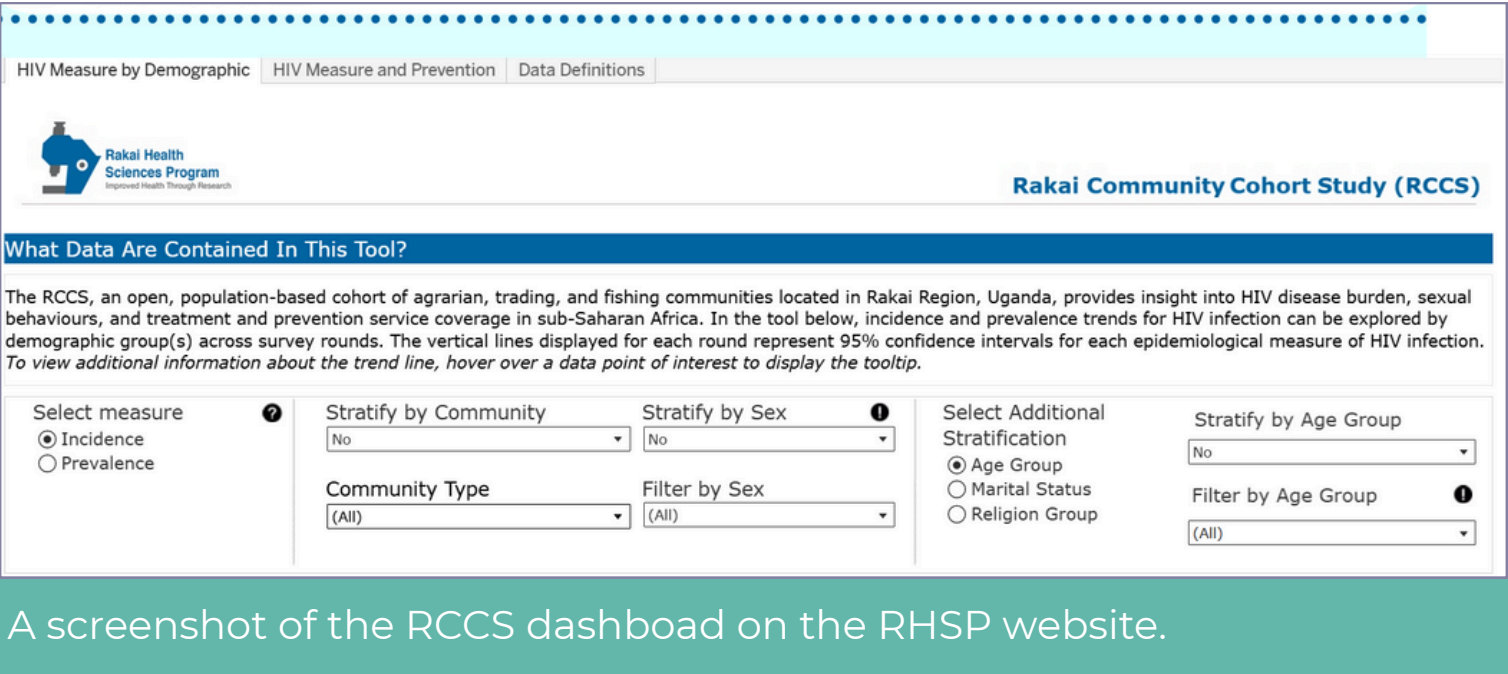
A historic milestone for the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP)—our facilities are now fully powered by solar energy.

This shift ensures sustainable, reliable power for our critical research and healthcare services, reducing costs and carbon emissions while strengthening our commitment to global public health.

Read more about our net zero transition here:
<https://sustainability.jhu.edu/news/sustainability-spotlight-rakai-health-sciences-program-completes-net-zero-transition/>

Picture: The aerial view of the RHSP main building and freezer house with solar panels installations.

THE RCCS DASHBOARD: GATEWAY TO HIV SURVEILLANCE DATA



The Rakai Community Cohort Study (RCCS) dashboard enables researchers to explore long-term HIV incidence and prevalence trends in agrarian, trading, and fishing communities located in Rakai region of south-central, Uganda from 1994 to 2021.

In addition, researchers can explore the impact of the combination HIV prevention strategy including HIV counseling and testing, voluntary medical male circumcision, antiretroviral therapy for participants living with HIV, and behavioral change on trends in HIV infection.

The RCCS dashboard contains data from participants in 30 RCCS agrarian that were continuously surveyed from 1999 to 2021 using data collected over 14 survey rounds, each conducted at approximately 18-month intervals. It also contains data from four HIV hyperendemic fishing communities which were included in the cohort as of 2011 and have since been subsequently surveilled.

Participant eligibility criteria for inclusion in the dashboard are: 1) residing as a permanent resident in their respective community; fishing communities include transient residents, 2) being between the ages of 15 and 49 years, plus 50+ included from later surveys starting from 2021, 3) undergoing HIV testing. Data from sexual partners (official marriage or consensual relationship) at each study visit were linked using unique study identifiers.

Curious about how HIV trends have changed over the years?

Check out the RCCS Dashboard [now](#) and explore real data from communities in Rakai dating back to 1994.

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SUPPORT THE LIFESAVING WORK OF RHSP

For over 35 years, the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) has led groundbreaking research and delivered high-impact healthcare services across Uganda and beyond.

From HIV prevention and treatment to maternal health, community outreach, and more—our work continues to save lives and shape health policy.

If you believe in the power of science, data, and community-driven care, you can now directly support our mission.

Make a Difference Today

Your contribution helps RHSP advance vital research, expand healthcare access, and strengthen communities through evidence-based solutions.

Every donation fuels lifesaving programs, innovative research, and sustainable health interventions that impact countless lives.

How to donate:

Join us in making a lasting impact. [click here](#) to donate and become part of the movement driving positive change in public health.

