

# Perspectives of healthcare providers on HIV treatment dispensing duration in South Africa

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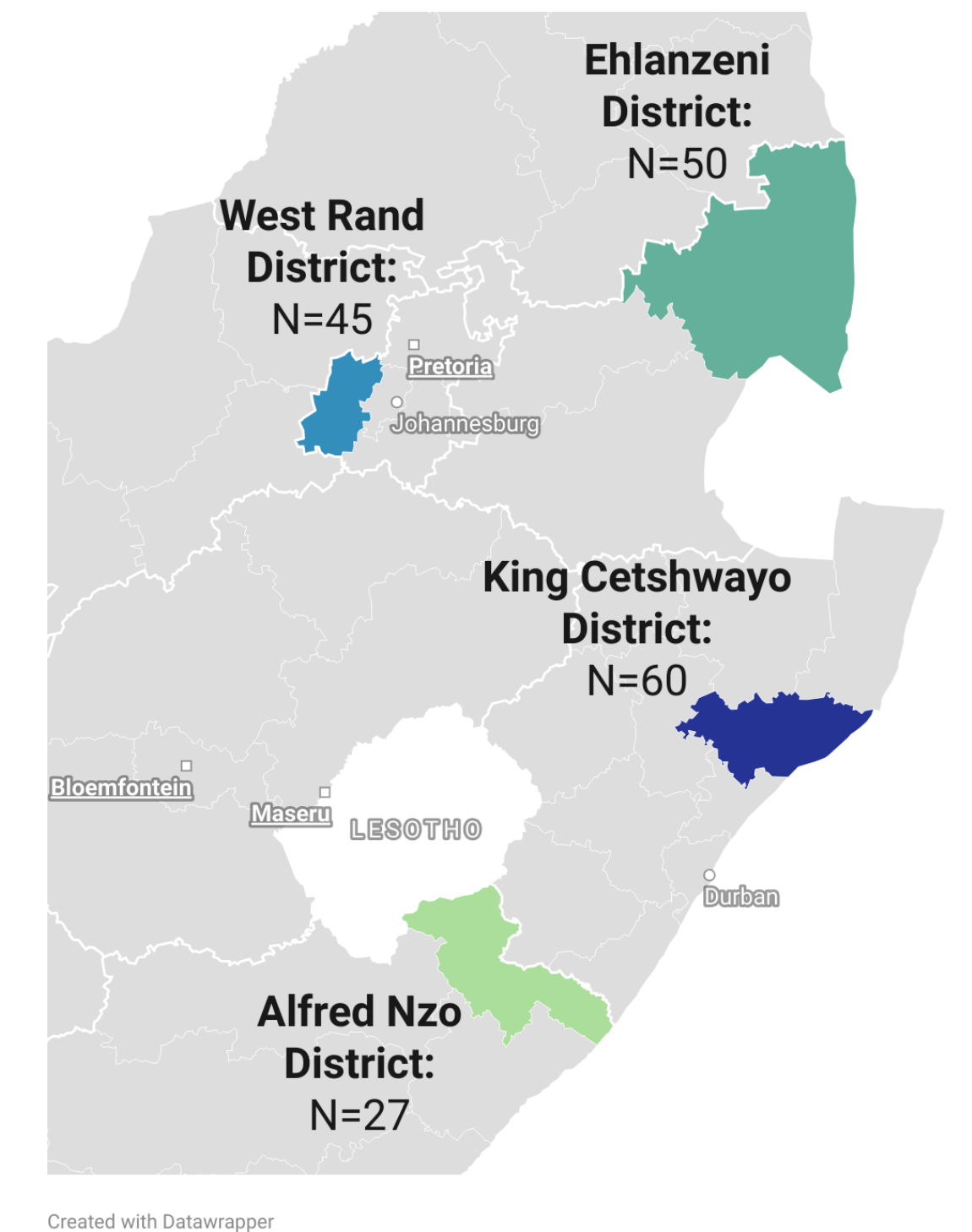
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## BACKGROUND / INTRODUCTION

- Through differentiated models of service delivery (DMOCs), the dispensing duration for antiretroviral (ART) medication (the number of months of medication provided at one time) has increased from 1-3 months to 6 months in many African countries.
- In 2023, the recommended dispensing interval in South Africa rose from 2 to 3 months for established ART clients. By June 2024, 2/3 of refills for clients enrolled in DMOCs were for 3 months.
- The 2023 ART guidelines allow six-month ART dispensing (6MMD) for stable clients, but 6MMD has not yet been implemented nationally.
- We asked healthcare providers in South Africa their perspectives on the benefits and challenges of the current 3-month ART dispensing duration and their opinions about 6MMD and 12-month scripting.

## METHODS

- We interviewed healthcare providers at 24 public primary healthcare clinics across four districts of South Africa (see map) from May to August 2024.
- Providers were eligible if they were directly or indirectly involved in DSD implementation.
- Interviews were conducted with facility managers, nurses, counsellors and pharmacists.
- Questions were both quantitative and qualitative.



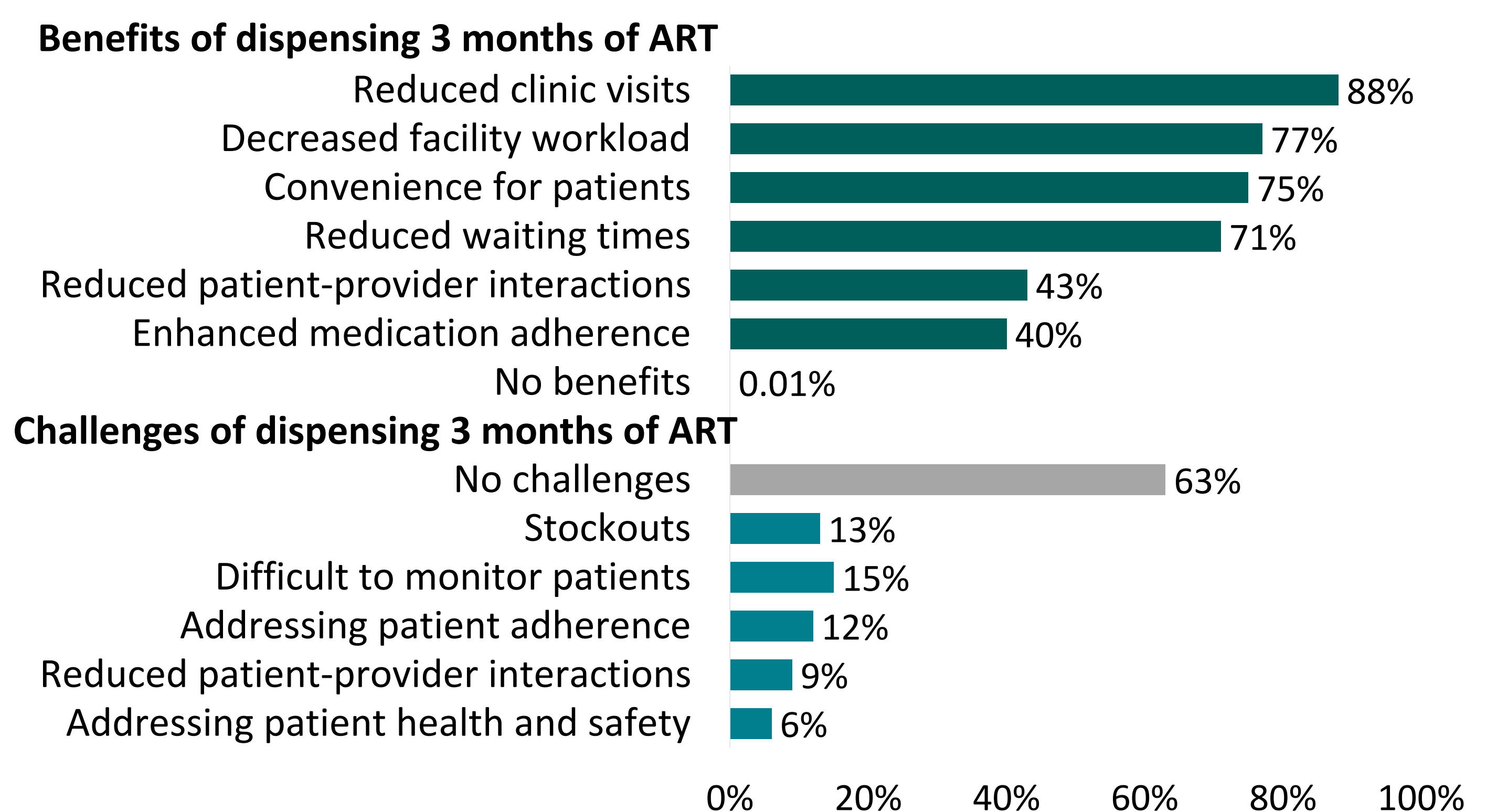
## RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of providers interviewed (N=182)

| Staff cadre, n (%)                         |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| Nurses                                     | 124 (68)          |
| Lay counselor/Outreach worker/CHW          | 22 (12)           |
| Site operations manager/Facility-in-charge | 15 (8)            |
| Pharmacist/Pharmacy Assistant              | 10 (6)            |
| Administration clerks                      | 9 (5)             |
| Linkage officers                           | 2 (1)             |
| <b>Employed by DOH (v. partner), n (%)</b> | <b>167 (92)</b>   |
| <b>Age, median (IQR)</b>                   | <b>44 (37-52)</b> |
| <b>Female, n (%)</b>                       | <b>161 (88)</b>   |
| <b>Years in role, median (IQR)</b>         | <b>11 (5-17)</b>  |

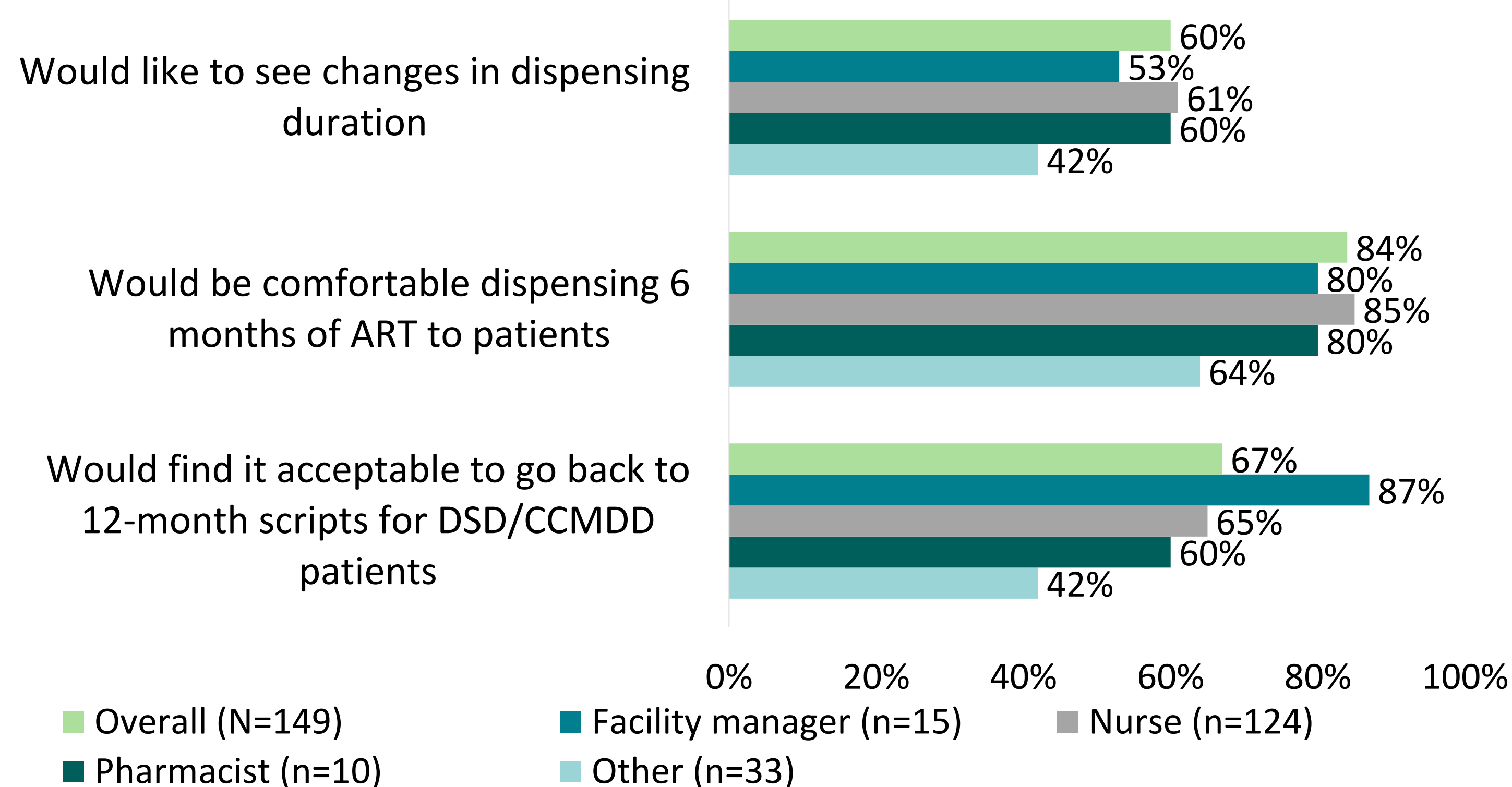
- 98% of providers reported that the maximum ART dispensing duration in their clinic was 3 months. The remaining 2% reported that the maximum duration was 2 months.
- Providers reported that in comparison to 1- or 2- month dispensing, 3-month dispensing decreased clinic visits, decreased facility workloads, was convenient to patients, and reduced clinic wait.
- Few providers reported challenges with 3-month dispensing (Figure 1).
- 60% of providers surveyed would like to see a further increase in dispensing interval and 84% would be comfortable 6 months of ART (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Provider reported benefits and challenges of 3-month ART dispensing



- Providers perceived the benefits of 6MMD to be reduced clinic visits and decreased workload.
- A minority of providers raised concerns regarding adherence and retention if 6-month dispensing were to be offered.
- 67% of providers reported that they would find it acceptable to go back to 12-month scripting, as was permitted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Providers' views on longer ART dispensing durations, stratified by provider role



### Providers told us:

"Dispensing duration to be **extended to at least 6 months** which will **reduce the frequency of medication refills and allow for more efficient management of patients**" – Professional nurse

"Because of the nature of their work it's important to prioritize their needs, our clients work in farms, gardens and sugar canes sometimes **it's hard for them to get to the clinic**" – Professional nurse

"[12-month scripting] can decrease workload, align with VL blood collection cycle, be cost effective for our clients, we can also **provide holistic patient examination, and it can improve quality of care**" – Site operations manager/facility in charge

"**Patients won't come back to the facility.** [12-month scripting] will create a lot of dormant patients who have been lost to follow up" – Professional nurse

## CONCLUSION

Most healthcare providers at primary healthcare clinics in South Africa report that 3-month dispensing has been beneficial to facilities and clients, and most are in favour of having six-month dispensing and 12-month scripting as options for established ART clients. Few foresee major challenges to 6MMD implementation.