

HIV in Pakistan: An emerging menace

Madam, HIV is a growing health concern in this part of the world as we live in a low prevalence high risk country for HIV spread, sharing our borders with the HIV havocted India. IV drug abuse, alarming rise in non-marital sex and lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS transmission compounded with a lethargic government response and distressing social demographics have eventually led us to experience and confront the unfortunate HIV/AIDS epidemics.¹ According to UNAIDS estimates of 2007, HIV cases increased from 51,000 in 2001 to 96,000, majority being males (72%).²

HIV prevalence reached 31% amongst the Injection Drug Users (IDUs) in 2007 in Karachi making them the most vulnerable group.³ Males migrating from rural to urban areas for earning usually get involved in unsafe sexual practices being helped by the emergence of "red light areas" in the metropolitan cities.⁴ Professional blood donors and inadequate blood screening techniques worsen the scenario.

A Federal Committee on AIDS was founded by the Ministry of Health in 1987 followed by National AIDS control Program looking forward to prevention of HIV transmission, screening blood transfusions and establishment of a mass surveillance system. A major boost came in 2004 with the establishment of Enhanced HIV/ AIDS Control Program funded by World Bank. By employing the NGOs it sought to provide HIV prevention services to IDUs and sex workers along with other susceptible masses. However, it still has to go a long way in educating the masses regarding HIV transmission and eliminating their stigmas and misconceptions about the disease. HIV treatment started

in 2005. Currently around 900 individuals are getting HIV medication free of charge.¹

Unfortunately awareness about HIV/ AIDS in the general population is low. A study in Islamabad revealed that 60% of secondary school teachers still thought that HIV/AIDS was insignificant in our society.⁵ By means of education and awareness about HIV/AIDS amongst the masses, use of condoms during sexual intercourse, discouraging non marital sex and wide spread screening of the high risk populations, we will be able to keep our doors shut to massive HIV/AIDS epidemics in the future.

One wonders if universal tattooing of HIV/AIDS patients in a specific position can be a useful preventive measure. As tattooing will act as a deterrent for future disease transmission, human right activists may object to this proposal as the right of HIV/AIDS patients will be jeopardized!

Abdul Rahman, Syed Muhammad Ali Saad
Class of 2011, Dow Medical College, Karachi.

References

1. Rai MA, Warraich HJ, Ali SH, Nerurkar VR. HIV/AIDS in Pakistan: the battle begins. *Retrovirology* 2007; 4: 22.
2. WHO, UNAIDS and UNICEF. Epidemiological fact sheet on HIV and AIDS: Pakistan, 2008.
3. HIV Second Generation Surveillance in Pakistan, National Report Round 2. In National AIDS Control Programme Ministry of Health, Government of Pakistan and Canada-Pakistan HIV/AIDS Surveillance Project, 2006-7.
4. Khawaja ZA, Gibney L, Ahmed AJ, Vermund SH. HIV/AIDS and its risk factors in Pakistan. *AIDS* 1997; 11: 843-8.
5. Shaikh IA, Shaikh MA. Teachers attitudes about HIV/AIDS prevention education in secondary schools. *J Coll Physicians Surg Pak* 2005; 15: 582.