

# **The Node,**

*... from which a leaf arises from a stem*



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## **AIDS: Men Make a Difference**

The theme for the 2000 World AIDS Campaign is “**Men Make A Difference**”. It focuses on men’s behaviour in relation to the spread and containment of HIV/AIDS, and their contribution towards the fight against AIDS.

### **Why focus on men?**

Men are less likely to take care of their health and much more likely to put their health at risk by drinking or using illicit substances, compared with women. Cultural belief of masculinity and expectation on men too have an adverse effect on attitudes and behaviour for the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Men are consequently less forthcoming with their problems as a result of this “invincible image”. Although the virus can affect both sexes, women are particularly vulnerable because they have less say in determining if, where or when sex should take place. Men may therefore be better targets for HIV prevention, promotion of responsible and safer sexual practice.

On the other hand, it is important to realise that stigmatization or negative labeling is counterproductive to the effort of HIV prevention and health promotion. Thus, we should not isolate men as the origin of problem. Instead, it is more crucial to involve men in search for a solution.

### **Men as part of the solution in the region**

This gendered approach is to reinforce men as partners rather than outsiders in the fight against AIDS. The essence of this approach can be illustrated by using Hong Kong as an example.

History of HIV infection in Hong Kong began in the early 1980s, when many of the infected were males comprising of haemophiliac patients received HIV contaminated blood products and men who have sex with men. Over the years, the pattern has now changed to predominately sexual transmission, with increasing importance through heterosexual intercourse. Naturally, this has resulted in growing number of HIV infections in women; however, men continue to represent the majority of people living with HIV/AIDS at present. Hong Kong has seen an increase in sexual offences by 30% in the first quarter of this year as compared with the same period last year. At the same time, we have also noticed a worsening situation of drug misuses especially amongst the youth, in particular teenage boys. Furthermore, across the border at neighbouring provinces in the mainland, around 70% of recently detected HIV infections were from sharing contaminated equipment whilst injecting illicit drugs. With improved transportation, the population has become more mobile which unfortunately has implication on disease

spread. Now is the crucial moment to start involving men in changes of their attitudes and behaviours which can slow down the epidemic, and also improve the lives of men themselves, their families and their partners.

### **Areas to be focused onto for Men and AIDS:**

#### **1. Gender Awareness**

Enhancing gender equality and equity by challenging outdated concepts of masculinity and other gender stereotypes, and promoting behaviours that boys or men are expected to follow.

#### **2. Men's Health**

Generally, men are less likely to seek needed health care than women. Many of the health problems that men face could be prevented or even cured with early medical intervention or a change in lifestyle. Men should be encouraged to use health services and seek support when they need it. Providing an affordable high-quality service during convenient working hours, together with a team of caring and sensitive staff who will ensure privacy and confidentiality will increase the chances of men using the service.

#### **3. Behavioural Modification**

Facilitating men to discuss about sex, drug use and AIDS with their partners together with the provision of appropriate sources of information and support can help reduce high risk sex and drug-related risk. They should be advised to have non-penetrative sex or use of condom correctly and consistently, and to avoid drug misuse or else refrain from sharing injection equipment. Moreover, the recognition of power in gender relations can help men to acknowledge that acts of violence against women are both inexcusable and unacceptable. These acts can be a hindrance in the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

#### **4. Support and Care**

Men should be encouraged and be expected to care for their families as well as the community.

It is high time that men make their effort in the combat against HIV/AIDS. In response to the 2000 World AIDS Campaign, it is envisaged that men can “make a difference” now and in the future.

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