

The Node, **... from which a leaf arises from a stem**



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The Asian AIDS Epidemic – Next Millennium

By the end of 1999, the estimated number of people infected with HIV/AIDS is expected to reach 33.6 million worldwide. Of those affected, 32.4 million are adults and 1.2 million are children, according to the latest AIDS epidemic update published by the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Although this seems to be a relatively small increase when compared with the estimated totals at the end of 1998, the real increase is actually much bigger. With improved surveillance, it was evident that the total number of infections in a few populous countries was overestimated in 1998. In fact, after the adjustment it is estimated that some 5.6 million people (2.7 million men, 2.3 million women and 570,000 children under 15 years of age) has acquired HIV infections in the year 1999 alone.

Endeavour by some Asian Countries

There are successful and not so successful stories in the Asian Countries. In Thailand and the Philippines, the HIV infection rates have decreased or at least stabilised due to their effective prevention programmes. However, those striving for the success of HIV prevention should be aware of the increasing intravenous drug use, and low level of condom usage especially amongst clients of prostitutes and homosexuals, together with the stigma and shame associated with AIDS in some Asian countries, which can lead to a higher level of HIV infection.

Our neighbouring provinces

All 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions in China have now reported HIV/AIDS. According to the official figures, there were around 13,000 reported HIV infected cases cumulatively as at the end of 1998. The actual number was however much higher, with estimated number of between 300,000 and 500,000 people living with the disease at the time. Although HIV infection rate has remained relatively low in China with the overall HIV adult prevalence rate of less than 0.1%, there are some areas and particular populations that could suffer tragic consequences if not more is done. In fact, the 5 provinces with most serious HIV epidemics are at the Southwestern part of China, namely Yunnan, Guangxi, Sichuan, Xinjiang and Guangdong. At present, about 70% of the HIV infected are related to sharing needles among injecting drug users, with the number and the proportions of the infected on the increase. One of the reasons could be that these provinces (except Xinjiang) are closely situated to Myanmar, Lao or Thailand – the Golden Triangle, which results in a more convenient route for drug trafficking. Not surprisingly, drugs

can be more readily available with more injecting drug users around the region. Risk behaviours such as sharing of injecting equipment increase the likelihood of HIV infection. Moreover, the male to female ratio has decreased recently, which means that more women are affected, either through sexual intercourse or injecting drug use.

Future Direction

Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS told the delegates of the 5th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in Kuala Lumpur on 24th October 1999 that he could see 10 challenges in the fighting against HIV/AIDS for our region in the coming decade. The followings are the 10 points outlining his suggested actions for these challenges:

- 1). We need to put AIDS far higher on the political agenda, and on the national and regional development agenda – where it really matters.
- 2). We need to approach HIV as a development issue, while pushing up public health and medical standards in the response as much as possible.
- 3). While I believe in the essential role of government to create policies, exercise leadership over certain campaigns and resources, at the same time I strongly believe that community based action will make a decisive difference.
- 4). Policies to promote a supportive, enabling environment must go hand in hand with “interventions”.
- 5). We must fight harder against stigma and discrimination.
- 6). We must work with young people just as hard as we work with other groups who are most at risk of HIV infection.
- 7). We need to ensure access to care and treatment.
- 8). We need to prepare for impact alleviation on a massive scale.
- 9). We must broaden the partnerships in the response.
- 10). We need to expand the resources devoted to the response.

The fight against HIV/AIDS is far from over. “A low rate of HIV infection is no cause for celebration”, Dr. Peter Piot said, “With an epidemic of this scale, every new infection adds to the ripple effect, causing an impact on families, communities, households and increasingly, businesses and economies”.

Hong Kong has enjoyed a relatively low prevalence of HIV infection so far. However, there is no place for complacency. Instead, more coordinated effort should be made to maintain this low rate situation. This could only be achieved through increasing knowledge and promoting awareness on HIV/AIDS of the general public, thus enhancing collaboration among all stakeholders on the prevention and care of HIV infection, and further promoting attitude and behavioural changes in enabling a caring and accommodating society.

The above is abstracted and adapted from the AIDS epidemic update, December 1999 by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and World Health Organisation (WHO). The original document could be obtained at Red Ribbon Centre or UNAIDS website.

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