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21 Adiala Jail prisoners infected with HIV

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Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail found 21 of its prisoners infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) over last nine months. Most of them were injecting drug users, including four foreign women, well-placed sources told this scribe here on Monday.

In July 2009, the Adiala Jail's medical officer apprised the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) of 31 suspected cases of HIV. The NACP was quick to send a technical team to the prison to discuss the issue with medical officer and senior officials. The team, at the same time, counselled the suspected cases besides retesting them for

confirmation. The tests declared 14 of them HIV-positive.

On a follow-up visit to the jail in January 2010, the NACP team provided counselling services to HIV patients and suspects, besides collecting blood samples of 14 HIV-positive prisoners for performing CD-4 counts and viral loads. The prisoners in question were registered with the HIV/AIDS Treatment Centre of Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) for further management and treatment. During this visit, the team also collected blood samples of seven suspects for HIV tests and found two of them infected with the virus.

Two months later, the NACP again sent a team to the prison,

where 11 fresh suspected cases of HIV were reported. During the test, five of these prisoners tested positive for HIV. Without delay, they were registered with the PIMS treatment centre.

In all, Adiala Jail reported 49 suspected cases of HIV to the NACP between July 2009 and March 2010, and 21 of them were found positive.

With more and more HIV cases being reported by prisons, the Punjab Health Department puts the tally of HIV-positive inmates in provincial jails at around 200.

When contacted, NACP National Programme Manager Dr. Hasan Abbas Zaheer confirmed detection of 21 HIV-positive cases in Adiala Jail since July 2009.

He said that his organisation was providing the HIV patients and suspects with counselling service and completely free treatment, including imported medicines. He said prisoners were at an exceptionally high risk of contracting the virus due to injection drug use and unsafe sexual behaviours.

According to him, prisoners have reported a high incidence of HIV infection over last few years with foreigners jailed for drug-related offences making most of them.

He said the country had progressed from low to a concentrated level of HIV epidemic primarily because of consistently high prevalence of infection among injection drug users. He said there were

harm-reduction programmes with needle-syringe exchange and other services but the country was without drug (methadone or buprenorphine) substitution programmes.

Dr. Zaheer said like other chronic illnesses, HIV required expensive health services in terms of staff effort and expertise, laboratory testing and medication.

He said for prisoners, the NACP had been carrying out educational programmes along with voluntary testing and counselling services, which had proved effective in identifying individuals with previously unknown infection, promoting acceptance of and adherence to treatment interventions and post-release

follow-up, and reducing risk behavior in custody and after release.

He said the NACP was also planning to organise orientation sessions for jail authorities and prisoners to educate on and sensitise to HIV and AIDS.

"The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime in collaboration with NACP and provincial AIDS control programmes is supporting a yearlong project for HIV prevention among female prisoners in the country's 10 prisons, including Adiala Jail of Rawalpindi. Under the project, free services, including screening, confirmation, diagnostics, treatment and follow-up on site are being provided to HIV suspects and patients," he said.

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