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# National AIDS survey to kick off this month

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● SEHRISH WASIF

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The National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) will commence a national survey on HIV/AIDS from February.

National Programme Manager of NACP Dr Sajid Ahmad announced this in a session arranged here at the National Institute of Health on Monday.

Dr Ahmad said that out of 97,400 HIV positive individuals estimated by NACP in Pakistan, only 4,112 are registered with the government, while only 1,852 people of the registered individuals are receiving antiretroviral treatment.

"The low percentage of the registered patients is mainly due to stigma and discrimi-

nation against those suffering from HIV/AIDS," said Ahmad. In addition, there are only 14 treatment centres across the country, which are "insufficient".

Dr Ahmad said that said the national survey, funded by The Canadian International Development Agency, will provide data crucial to prevent an AIDS/HIV epidemic in Pakistan. The survey will be conducted in different phases. The initial phase will cover Sindh, Balochistan and

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provinces, while Punjab will be covered in the second phase. The survey will target high-risk groups, like male/female sex workers and transsexuals, and

around 33,000 blood samples of the target group will be collected and tested for HIV/AIDS. Besides this, these people will also be informed about the disease, its implications and measures for prevention.

With an early concentrated epidemic, Pakistan fits the typical "Asian epidemic model" where once the epidemic gets settled among the high-risk groups, it spreads rapidly to the general population due to prevalent risk behaviours and vulnerability, he said.

"However, Pakistan still has a window of opportunity to prevent the spread of HIV but it needs to act decisively," said Ahmad, as the estimated burden under 0.1 per cent of the adult population is still low. There are a number of multiple socio-cultural factors that have helped slow down the initial spread of AIDS/HIV, "but the country still has an array of risk factors which put it at a substantial risk of witnessing a full-blown HIV epidemic," Dr

SCREENING

# 23,000

blood samples will be collected and tested for HIV/AIDS during the survey

Ahmad added.

He said that due to the lack of finances, NACP could not properly carry out its activities to combat the HIV/AIDS from the country. "The funds were not released by the government because they were allocated for flood relief activities," he said. He added that The Global Fund,

and international organisation working to combat AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, has assured to provide \$1.3 million by the end of December 2011 to NACP.

While Pakistan has not yet seen a visible change in the development due to HIV & AIDS, some impact is occurring, and we can certainly speculate about the possible implications, if epidemic is not monitored well, he added.

He urged the media to play its role in discouraging the society from discriminating against people with HIV/AIDS and foster an environment where such individuals are hopeful to get treated and lead fulfilling lives.