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Call to change attitude towards Aids patients

By A Reporter

ISLAMABAD, Dec 7: The HIV infection rate in Pakistan has increased significantly over the last few years despite consistent efforts made by the government. As a result, the status has moved from low prevalence to concentrated epidemic with HIV prevalence of over 5 per cent among injecting drug users (IDUs) in at least eight major cities.

This was stated by Dr Hassan Zaheer, the manager of National Aids Control Programme (NACP), while speaking at a seminar here on Monday.

The awareness seminar was organised by NACP in connection with the World Aids Day.

Dr Zaheer, however, said the country had still a window of opportunity as the current estimates using different prevalence models indicated that the HIV prevalence among the adult population was below one per cent.

Director General Health Rasheed Jooma said concentrated efforts were needed to deal with the issue.

The Aids epidemiology is different in Pakistan where the epidemic largely prevails in high-risk groups with highest prevalence among IDUs, he said, adding the major reasons of the spread was reuse of syringes by drug addicts.

Other speakers stressed the need

to change the discriminatory attitude of the family and society towards HIV positive persons which compelled them to lead a life of isolation. They said each segment of society including government, media, family and neighbours as well as educational and religious institutions should play their role in eliminating the stigma faced by the sufferers.

The HIV epidemic mainly occurs among the injecting drug users (IDUs), male and female sex workers, transvestites and repatriated migrant workers.

In consequence, the number of parent-to-child transmission cases is also increasing.

Speaking on the occasion, Qasim Iqbal highlighted the need for raising awareness among the general public to make it clear that HIV/Aids patients needed sympathy like any person suffering from some other disease.

Sanaullah, an IDU from Sargodha, shared with the participants how he was excluded from his family and his job terminated after he got addicted.

According to a national survey, the prevalence rate of HIV among IDUs is 20 per cent.

Manzoor Iqbal, a migrant worker from UAE, who has been afflicted with the epidemic for the last ten years, pointed towards the need for

immediate counseling, health care service and alternative work for the sufferers.

Nargis, a female sex worker, said the stigma was more extensively directed against women than men.

It prevents women coming forward for conducting tests and reduces their choices in terms of healthcare and family life.

Shafiqur Rehman, another HIV positive who was sacked from service after he tested positive for HIV, said the illness had to be accepted as a disease, not a punishment. He regretted that discrimination against HIV positive patients was practiced everywhere.