

Newspaper Cuttings from "The News" Dated April 21, 2010

Pre-Marital HIV Testing

Jamila Achakzai
Islamabad

The proposal of making HIV testing mandatory for couples before marriage does not sit well with the man heading the Health Ministry's initiative for containing the spread of the virus, which causes the deadly acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

"I don't favour pre-marital mandatory HIV testing in light of international experiences. Mandatory testing has proved counterproductive the world over, as it keeps people from presenting themselves for voluntary testing and thus, driving the infection underground. We encourage voluntary testing preceded by effective counselling. Instead of harassing people by imposing things on them, we need to create public awareness of the benefits of blood screening for HIV. Only better awareness can push people into HIV testing," National AIDS Control Programme's (NACP) National Manager Dr. Hasan Abbas Zaheer told 'The News' on Tuesday.

Dr. Zaheer also said given the discrimination and

NACP chief considers mandatory test 'counterproductive'

stigma attached with HIV/AIDS, making blood screening mandatory before marriage could lead to issuance of countless fake clearance certificates. According to him, in South Asia, Pakistan stands only a few steps behind India and Nepal in terms of HIV incidence. "Until recently, Pakistan was classified, as a low prevalence, high risk country, but now, it is in a concentrated phase of the epidemic with HIV prevalence of more than five per cent among injecting drug users in at least eight major cities," he said. The situation is not hopeless for Dr. Zaheer, however. "The HIV prevalence among general adult population is still below one per cent. I see a window of opportunity in it to check the spread of HIV/AIDS. We along with our provincial units are successfully implementing a nationwide programme to contain the epidemic through interventions like HIV prevention and treatment services, ad-

vocacy, communication and stigma reduction campaign, governance and institutional framework of the response and HIV-related research," he said.

The NACP chief put the tally of estimated HIV/AIDS in the country at 97,400 and registered ones at 6,098 including 5,592 HIV positive and 506 AIDS positive. He said a good number of the HIV carriers didn't know about their disease, while many others were under treatment abroad.

He said 21 per cent prevalence of HIV among high risk groups in Pakistan was among injecting drug users, 0.9 per cent among male sex workers, 6.4 per cent among eunuch sex workers and 0.01 per cent among female sex workers. He said migrants made a good number of HIV/AIDS victims. In his opinion, the disease trends are changing in the country.

He said under the five years plan, the NACP were

scaling up the coverage and activities to control the spread of HIV among most at risk groups. "We are providing people living with HIV with medical and social services to enjoy their life without facing any stigma and discrimination. This is contributing to a multi-sectoral, comprehensive and sustainable response to HIV based on evidence, transparency and accountability, and involving the various line ministries, the civil society and the main target beneficiaries," he said.

According to Dr. Zaheer, the current financial crunch faced by government has no negative bearing on the ongoing NACP projects for their being funded by international donors by and large. "We draw little funds from government. Most of our initiatives are driven by foreign grants. Therefore, the government's current financial constraints have no adverse impacts on our programme," he said. He said he was sat-

isfied with the grants coming from donor agencies.

When asked, he confirmed institutional discrimination against HIV/AIDS suspects and patients. He said besides being treated as castaway in society, people, who carried HIV/AIDS symptoms or tested positive for the disease, lost jobs and were denied salary and benefits. He said though such discrimination was seen mostly in private sector organisations, unfair treatment with people living with HIV/AIDS was also reported in some government institutions too.

The NACP chief said following its approval by the Planning Commission's Central Development Working Party, work on the Rs2.5 billion National Blood Transfusion Service project carrying a foreign funding of 17 million euros had begun. According to him, a project management unit is being set up on the premises of NACP with the collaboration

of German government to implement the five-year public health project, which envisages establishment of 13 regional blood transfusion centres all over the country and refurbishment of 90 existing hospital based blood banks.

"The role of the regional centres will serve as blood procurement and distribution centres ensuring quality systems to regulate all activities including mobilisation and retention of voluntary blood donors, collection of blood donations and processing, screening, testing and component preparation and storage. The linked blood banks will be refurbished, their equipment replaced and manpower trained to adapt them to their new patient oriented role," he said.

He said the specific objectives of the project included assessing technical support needs at all levels on the basis of the February 2005 assessment report, specifically with respect to changes occurring during this time period regarding, and developing concepts and recommendation for overcoming pitfalls and developing a dynamic blood transfusion systems.

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