

EDITORIAL

IS PAKISTAN FACING HIV EPIDEMIC?

HIV is recognized as a health concern in Pakistan with the number of cases growing. Moderately high drug use and lack of acceptance that sexual promiscuity is not uncommon in the society have allowed the HIV epidemic to take hold in Pakistan. HIV infection can lead to AIDS that may become a major health issue.^[1]

According to Pakistan Demographic Health Survey (PDHS) 2017-18, 23% of women and 67% men have heard about AIDS. Only 18% of women and 56% of men in age group of 15 to 49 years are familiar with prevention methods of HIV.^[2] According to UNAIDS statistics, HIV infection in Pakistan has increased by 57% from 2010 to 2018.^[1]

According to an estimate by UNAIDS, Pakistan contains approximately 130 000 people living with HIV.^[3] Since 2004, the distribution of HIV incidence in Pakistan have developed from high-risk groups to concentrated epidemics. In the past Pakistan has faced outbreaks of HIV infection. In 2018 this disease was reported in Sargodha, in a village near to Kot Momin, where 35 out of 2717 residents were diagnosed with HIV. In April 2019, recent outbreak in district Larkana Sindh till May 20th, more than 10,000 children and adults have been screened as part of the ongoing government effort. In total, 607 were HIV-positive: 113 adults and 494 children. According to the authorities, in most cases the parents of these children were not HIV-positive^[4].

It's a disease that is all too familiar in this part of the country. The province accounts for nearly half of the 150,000 HIV-positive cases in Pakistan, according to UNAIDS. In this particular outbreak, blame was initially focused on local paediatrician, who was later also diagnosed HIV positive, but the tragedy is now being linked to major failures in the health care system, including reuse of syringes and lack of standards for safe blood transfusions.

According to the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council, an estimated 200,000 unqualified medical personnel are practicing in the province of Sindh. What's more, even if medical staff disposes off needles, there are still risks of repackaging of used syringes and selling them in the market.

Several factors, including low literacy, high poverty, and unsafe blood transfusions have made Pakistan more vulnerable to HIV spread than other countries. Lapses in basic health facilities have worsened the situation. Most residents of rural areas of Pakistan are uneducated on the possible reasons for HIV spread. Additionally, barbers contribute to the spread of HIV by the reuse of razors. Furthermore, HIV has never been a priority programme in the national health system and the recent abolition of the federal health ministry and the devolution of its functions to the provinces, which lacked preparedness and capacity, have led to the increase in HIV infection.

Government of Pakistan offers free HIV testing and treatment, however, widespread stigma and discrimination in the society, the fear of maltreatment, and punitive actions by law enforcers adversely affects the willingness of this segment of population to pursue testing. This remains a major challenge facing national efforts to treat and prevent the spread of HIV infection. The number of new cases of HIV infection will continue to increase dramatically if implementation of

intervention remains at current level. The government should lead awareness programs in collaboration with NGOs for the general population. Issue of quackery must be addressed on war footing if menace of this disease is to be eliminated.

REFERENCES:

- 1 UNAIDS. Pakistan country fact sheet 2016. United Nations program on HIV/AIDS. Accessed from URL:<http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/Pakistan> Retrieved on 20th May, 2019
- 2 National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS). Pakistan demographic and health survey 2017–18. 13.1 HIV/AIDS KNOWLEDGE, TRANSMISSION, AND PREVENTION METHODS
- 3 The world Bank. HIV/AIDS in Pakistan. Accessed from URL:<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/07/10/hiv-aids-pakistan> Retrieved on 22nd May, 2019
- 4 Voice of America (VOA). WHO: HIV Epidemic spreads at alarming rate in Pakistan. Accessed from URL:<https://www.voanews.com/a/who-says-hiv-epidemic-spreads-at-alarming-rate-in-pakistan/4683295.html> Retrieved on 20th MAY, 2019

Zahid Masood

Professor of Community Medicine,
Madinah Teaching Hospital, University Medical & Dental College,
Faisalabad