People Need HIV/AIDS Information

For people to take steps to avoid HIV/AIDS, they must first hear of it. In Manipur, 95 percent of adults have heard of the disease. Information about HIV/AIDS is nearly universal among men and women in both rural and urban areas. For those who have heard of the disease, radio accounted for most of that knowledge, followed by friends or relatives. Only 6 percent of ever-married women had heard of the disease from a health worker.

The BSS 2001 revealed that awareness of the use of the condom as a means to prevent HIV/AIDS was far from universal. In the rural areas, 43.2 percent of women and 19.0 percent of men were not aware of its value.

A majority felt it was possible to be tested confidentially for the disease (50.9 percent), but most had no idea where to go for most of that knowledge, followed by friends or relatives. Only 6 percent of ever-married women had heard of the disease from a health worker.

What must be done?

- The stigma associated with people living with HIV/AIDS must be ended. Women and orphans are cast from families, children from their school and workers from their workplace. Ignorance breeds needless fear.
- Confidential testing centres must be made operational in every district. HIV/AIDS must be fought at the grass-roots level.
- Women are a vital target for information and testing, lest they be left defenseless. It is also important to reach drug users and their partners.
- HIV/AIDS information — and counseling — must be universal. Everyone should know the truth about HIV/AIDS.
- People must learn that a single, uninfected partner is the best defence.
- Those who do engage in risky behaviour must learn the value of a high quality condom and how to obtain one.
- Treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS, including antiretroviral drugs, should be provided free of charge, given that the expense is beyond the reach of many.
- The importance of quickly educating youth is a key element in the campaign.

All the danger signs are there. Knowledge of the disease itself is low, the knowledge of preventive measures is far short of what is necessary and counseling is unavailable to many. HIV/AIDS has come to Manipur and is now a genuine epidemic.
How Far Has AIDS Spread?

Officially reported AIDS cases from hospitals and clinics across the state are only a small fraction of the total. However, their number has risen from 770 in March 2001 to 1,238 through August 2003.

Among adults, males are infected 3:1 compared to females, but the number of infected females is rising. About 90 percent of the total reported AIDS cases are in the age group 15-44.

The National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) now classifies the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Manipur as high prevalence, compared to females, but the number of infected women is rising. About 90 percent of the total reported AIDS cases are in the age group 15-44.

The Problem of Drug Use in Manipur

Manipur recorded one of the highest HIV prevalence rates among IDUs in the country. Drug users who share needles pose a particular problem in the state. Among IDUs, those in the age group 20-44 pose a particular problem in the state. In the rural areas had slightly higher rates of infection than those in urban areas. This raises a serious public health issue as rural populations have less access to medical diagnosis and treatment.

The high rate in rural areas requires greatly increased efforts for HIV education outside cities and towns. Reaching down to village panchayats to convince them of the need to overcome the stigma associated with AIDS and the discussion of it has become a critical need. People fear the stigma from even being tested, knowing they are likely to be ejected from their household, village or school.

A true AIDS epidemic is not a future possibility for Manipur, it is a present reality...

Bridge Groups

The high rate of HIV infection among women in antenatal clinics indicates that the disease is being carried to the general population by a "bridge" group. It is unlikely that these women contracted the disease through their own behaviour, but through that of their husbands.

Tragically, pregnant women can pass the infection to their unborn child or, after birth, by breastfeeding, an otherwise recommended practice.

The proportion of pregnant women who test positive for HIV is alarming in Manipur, with rates as high as 8.8 percent having been recorded in 2002. These are very high rates for women who are not believed to engage in risky sexual or drug use behaviour and should be at a low risk of contracting the disease.

AIDS moves through society

The problem of drug use in Manipur

The fight against AIDS will fail if its stigma cannot be overcome. The fear of being stigmatized for simply being tested for the infection allows AIDS to spread undetected from person to person...

Condom Use Short of Goal

One of the best defences against HIV is a single, uninfected partner. The Behavioural Surveillance Survey (BSS) 2001, conducted by NACO, revealed the extent of this problem in the state. When one's behaviour is risky, the primary defence is a high quality condom. Although condom use has become more widespread in urban areas, about one-half of BSS respondents did not use a condom consistently with non-regular sex partners in the previous year. In rural areas, consistent condom use was relatively rare. This is a critical issue because HIV will spread steadily with anything short of 100 percent use.

The sentinel site data show that the epidemic has spread to the general population. In Manipur, the HIV/AIDS outbreak is a genuine epidemic.