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IRIN News

Syria: Focus on HIV/AIDS

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Syrian youth receive information on HIV/AIDS

Damascus - Syria is a low prevalence rate country for HIV/AIDS but in spite of this, efforts to tackle the issue are being stepped up.

The aim is to try and prevent the disease spreading because of lack of awareness, particularly among young people.

"I do not want to die because of ignorance. I want to lead a better life. I am aware that inadequate information about the transmission of this disease and not receiving proper counseling could leave us to suffer in silence and not seek help," Suha, who only gave her first name, said as she took an AIDS test at a centre for counseling youth.

The centre is affiliated to the Syrian Family Planning Association (SFPA) and offers voluntary AIDS testing. The primary objective is to prevent and control the spread of HIV/AIDS through sex by changing sexual behaviour, a largely taboo subject in Syria. "I am impressed by the services offered here. It gives me great comfort, because this centre provides reproduction services as well, hence, nobody will notice that I am visiting the centre for an AIDS test," Suha added.

HIV/AIDS cases in Syria

The number of HIV/AIDS cases reported between 1987 and 2004 was 330, of which 126 were foreigners and 204 Syrians, according to government statistics. Dr Haytham Sweidan, director of the national AIDS programme at the Ministry of Health (MoH) said they were providing people with access to effective HIV prevention and treatment. Sweidan explained, however, that non-Syrians testing positive were immediately deported to their own countries.

Out of the 204 Syrians infected, 80 were HIV positive, while 124 were living with full-blown AIDS, of whom 101 had died. The majority of those infected were male and aged between 19 and 45. Mother-to-child transmission represented 4 percent of the transmissions and infections through blood transfusions stood at 11 percent, he explained.

The trend is that more young women are being infected than young men and although many cases may be unreported, Syria still has a low prevalence rate, the official said.

Awareness and Education

The government programme in place since 1987, has developed a strategy to prevent the spread of the disease by providing information, preventing mother-to-child transmission and expanding care and treatment such as provision of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs for children and parents living with HIV/AIDS.

The message of the programme is communicated through print, the electronic media and various publications, in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF. " We continuously hold training courses for young people on HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases," he said.

HIV/AIDS awareness has also been integrated into secondary school curricula within subjects such as science and literacy, as the most serious epidemic threatening human beings. " The Ministry of Education (MoE) is currently developing the school curriculum and has put more focus on this epidemic," Ghalia Zuhour Adi, head of the curriculum department, MoE said.

Targeting youth

UNICEF plans to expand protection and support for orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS, including fighting discrimination against those living with the virus. Dr Lama Mouakea, SFPA's executive director, said the main concern now was that poor awareness could bring a rise in prevalence rates among the youth. " The only weapon against this deadly disease is prevention."

Rula Qeteb, a volunteer at the centre for counseling youth said most visitors were university students. "We receive approximately 10 cases every day, some for counseling and information about the disease; others come for the rapid AIDS test. A number of cases were positive," she explained.

A hotline has also been established for counseling and information.

" The average person just doesn't seem to be able to grasp the immediacy of the threat of HIV/AIDS, as some visitors are not careful, they don't get themselves tested, even though they have more than one sexual partner," Qeteb added.

Working with Experts

The Syrian national AIDS programme is supported by UNAIDS. This ensures that global policies are applied in combating the disease, supervising training and educational courses, conducting studies on AIDS and taking care of those living with the virus. There are no special hospitals for those with HIV/AIDS, because there is no need to quarantine or isolate HIV/AIDS patients as it cannot be transmitted through daily social contact, Sweidan said, pointing out that HIV/AIDS patients should not be discriminated against or stigmatised.

In addition, in every governorate there is a physician in charge of the implementation of the national AIDS programme, to confidentially monitor patients, he added. " Our success in combating HIV/AIDS must be measured by its impact on our children and

young people," Mamadou Kiari Liman-Tinguiri, UNICEF representative in Damascus, said in remarks he made during a recent workshop on AIDS.

He pointed out that the agency had supported NGOs in working together to establish AIDS/HIV information centres. They educate young people about the disease and teach them skills in decision-making and communication, as well as improving their self-confidence and ability to make informed choices.

Regional Efforts

Syria has set a target of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015 as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were signed up to in 2000. More than 40 million people worldwide are HIV positive.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in May, that HIV/AIDS was still posing a grave threat to the world. However, Annan admitted that the goal of containing the deadly disease by 2015 was no longer realistic.

Sweidan pointed out that the number of infections in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was increasing markedly, although it has a low prevalence rate at present running at 0.3 percent, one of the lowest rates in the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that socio-economic factors in the region as well as emigration and immigration indicate there will be an increase in the disease in coming years.