



7th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific
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Press release

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Six million HIV infections can be averted in the Asia Pacific region in the next five years if prevention services are rapidly expanded

Impact of HIV/AIDS on children could be minimised if parents remain free of HIV

Kobe, Japan – Without immediate and extraordinary action on AIDS, the Asia Pacific region will see 12 million new HIV infections in the next five years. If urgent measures are adopted, that number can be cut in half.

While much attention has been devoted in recent years to scaling-up treatment for those already living with HIV/AIDS, the delegates at the 7th ICAAP congress this week have reiterated the need to focus our efforts as well on preventing further infections from happening in the first place.

New information on the regional HIV/AIDS epidemic have highlighted this week that the worst HIV predictions of the past are coming true: Asia and the Pacific countries now stand at a crucial ‘tipping point’ with a dangerous cocktail of risk factors in place that will lead to rapid and irreversible expansion of HIV spread if left unchecked.

One presentation after another this week has indicated that previous warnings have not been adequately heeded, and that today there is widespread injecting drug use, rising rates of sex work among young women under 25, and that there is high HIV prevalence – and low access to HIV prevention services – among all vulnerable groups.

Despite some early successes in addressing HIV spread in countries such as Thailand, where a massive 100% condom campaign was implemented in the mid-90s, large-scale interventions are in decline and today are relatively scarce in the region. As a consequence, condom use has fallen to extremely low levels, for example, and HIV testing coverage is minimal.

Years of low HIV levels do not protect countries from the threat of a major national epidemic, according to a statement issued by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) during the conference. Given that countries of the region make up half of the world’s population, even low HIV prevalence translates into millions of HIV infections.

That means countries such as Bangladesh, East Timor, Japan, Laos, Pakistan, and the Philippines – and many others – have golden opportunities to prevent serious outbreaks of HIV.

Immediately prior to the conference in Kobe, Japan, a new global strategy was

launched to mobilize an intensification of HIV prevention. Aiming for a focus on HIV prevention to match the current attention on AIDS treatment, the new UN position paper is grounded in a number of essential principles crucial to the success of any effective HIV prevention effort. These include that all prevention programmes should be comprehensive in scope, evidence-based and must be fundamentally grounded in respect for human rights. Contrary to its treatment counterpart strategy, 3by5, the global prevention policy does not specify any global prevention targets it aims to achieve in the next five years.

The strategy underlines the gaps in existing HIV prevention actions and outlines essential policy and programmatic actions that must be taken to scale to bridge these gaps. Key to all HIV prevention efforts, the paper says, is that they should be 'nationally owned and led'.

During ICAAP, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Family Health International (FHI) and Save the Children UK also highlighted the impact that a future runaway Asian epidemic would have on the children of the region.

They said that more than 1.5 million children in Asia and the Pacific are already orphaned by AIDS, according to new regional data, making protection, care and support efforts for children more urgent than ever.

While the number of children orphaned by AIDS is alarming, they represent only a segment of those affected by HIV/AIDS. Many more children in Asia and the Pacific are thought to be living with sick and dying parents or relatives and are at risk of losing their caregivers.

In addition to those orphaned by AIDS, another 121,000 children were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific by the end of 2004, with an estimated 47,000 children newly infected last year alone.

One of the assured ways to protect children from each of these fates is to reduce the number of new HIV infections among adults.

"This is an urgent wake up call for action," said Anupama Rao Singh, Regional Director of UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office. "We not only have to do much more to protect and care for these children, but also step up primary prevention efforts to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS."

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