

November 26, 2006 – India becomes ‘AIDS Guru’

By Harinder Singh Bagwara

Jaipur has the highest number of HIV/ADS cases in the state of Rajasthan, a government survey has indicated. The survey shows 1,919 HIV/AIDS cases in Jaipur alone. These numbers represent only those coming to government hospitals. They do not indicate the cases that may be reported at private hospitals.

As yet there is no cure for HIV. Prevention is the only way to check the infection. Indian pharmaceutical companies have contributed phenomenally by bringing out generic drugs and the cocktail therapy. The ‘*Cocktail Therapy*’ introduced by the Indian drug companies has enhanced the quality of life of many living with HIV/AIDS.

The ABC Theory

The scientists participating in the XVI International AIDS Conference in Canada concurred that ‘prevention is the best cure for AIDS’. Initially, scientists came up with the *CBA Theory; Condom, Behavioral Change and Abstinence*. This theory encourages the use of condoms in every sexual relationship. MSM (Men who Sex with Men) and other high-risk groups were advised to change their risky behaviour. And last but not least, people were urged to practice abstinence. The appeal was to avoid having sex at an early age and to be faithful to one’s partner or spouse.

This theory, however, was not very successful. This led to the *ABC Theory*; giving utmost importance to Abstinence, as the use of condom was not found to be 100 percent effective. Abstinence is a reflection of Indian philosophy. Schools and colleges in the US and Europe have founded ‘Abstinence Clubs’ to promote delaying the age of their first sexual encounter.

Yoga & Meditation

Indian Vedas (scriptures) uphold yoga and meditation as key to a long and healthy life. It has now found followers all over the world. Scientists agree that modern medicine can treat only the body. But yoga heals the mind. New age ‘Holistic Clinics’ promote yoga, meditation, behavioral change and even prayers. With the help of these, even the immune system can be strengthened.

‘Re-search’ and not ‘Research’

If a South African researcher is to be believed, circumcised men are 6 percent less susceptible to HIV infection. But this research carried out in the year 2005 is yet to be peer reviewed. This has nevertheless drawn the attention of scientists to the fact that there must have been some factor responsible for fewer number of HIV positive people in the Arabic and Indian societies. Hence, they are planning to do some more research along these lines.

Keep the promise, stop AIDS

Every year the World Health Organisation comes up with a new theme to bring about social awareness towards AIDS. The slogan 'Keep the promise, stop AIDS' was coined last year. Keeping the promise refers to being faithful to one; which has been a part of the Indian culture. The World Health Organisation has been so impressed by this theme that they decided to continue with it till the year 2010.

Neem (margosa) & tulsi (basil) are being revived (Reinventing neem & tulsi)

Neem and tulsi are the medicinal herbs that have been used by Ayurveda. Microbicides, products designed to reduce the transmission of microbes, available in both jelly and oil form, have shown some promising results. NARI (National AIDS Research Institute) is working on microbicides that will use neem and tulsi as the main component. India and Britain have carried out the first phase of clinical trials. The results have been encouraging so far. A scientist in Jaipur has already prepared a microbicide that can work as a contraceptive.

Feeling obliged

People living with HIV in African countries are grateful to the Indian drug manufacturers. The anti retrovirals (ARVs) were out of reach of these people, but with the intervention of Indian pharmaceutical companies, the cost of these medicines has come down to only 365 dollars per year. Previously, they would cost up to 5000 dollars per year. This has made ARVs accessible to many people living with HIV/AIDS. By introducing 'cocktail therapy' many drugs have been combined into one capsule. This has made consuming medicines easier and cheaper as well. People from Africa participating in the XVI International AIDS Conference protested against the US policies on drugs and patents by shouting the slogan "We want two pills, not two bills". They said that about 80 percent of the people living with HIV/AIDS have access to the drugs thanks to the Indian drug companies.

The situation is grave again

Even though the world refers to India as the 'AIDS guru' it is far from the truth. With increasing numbers of new infections, India itself is in trouble. About 57 lakh (5.7 million) people are living with HIV. Sex work, migration, untreated sexually transmitted infections, and poor health services continue to drive the epidemic. Illiteracy and low status of women are some of the other reasons. For most women, marriage itself has become a high risk behaviour. Young people, who are the future of India, are getting infected. Hence it becomes imperative that steps are taken to check the spread of HIV/AIDS.

AIDS in India

The first case of HIV infection was reported in India in Chennai in 1986. Today the numbers have reached an astounding 57 lakhs. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and the North-Eastern states are high prevalence states. If infection in the 'high-risk group' exceeds 1 percent of the total population of the state it is defined as a 'high-prevalence' area. The prevalence in Rajasthan is less than 1 percent, but the rate at which it is spreading it has been given the status of 'highly-vulnerable state'. India is second to only South Africa in terms of HIV infection. With 0.61 percent HIV positive people as compared to 21.5 percent in South Africa, India still has a large number of people living with HIV.

AIDS CASES IN RAJASTHAN

