

AIDS - A CHALLENGE TO SCIENCE AND SOCIETY *

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INTRODUCTION

AIDS - Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome was first reported in the United States in 1981. Today HIV- (Human Immuno Deficiency Virus) which causes AIDS is present in virtually all countries. It has infected about 18 million adults and 1.5 million children ¹.

At present the Asia-Pacific region may account for 15% of the world's cumulative HIV infection. It is expected that it will rise to 25% in just next five years over taking the devastating record sub-Saharan Africa. According to W.H.O about four crores will be infected by HIV by the end of 2000, out of which 50 lakhs will be in India. Now this - number is 1 crore 80 lakhs in the world,² as of date there are 1994 full blown cases on AIDS in India.

The Seropositive rate per thousand should ring alarm bell. In 1995, the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) registered the ratio of HIV positive per thousand at 7.09. The figure for September 1995 may touch 8.38 per thousand. Indian experts admit that the trends are indicative. ⁴

CAUSES

Poverty, unemployment, urban proliferation, high labour mobility and cross-border migration intensify the penetration of HIV and, being infected aggravates the original condition.

Persons indulging in unsafe sex (7733 cases)^A with more than one partners, getting tainted blood transfusion (from regular blood donors) (2830)^B and drug addicts (2168) ^C are helpless prey to AIDS. The risk is greater for women indulging in hetrogenous sexual activities or whose manfolk have multiple partners. The HIV transmission is three to four times greater in women than that in men. ⁵

The women who do not endorse the use of condoms stand a much higher risk of contracting AIDS. Hetro sexual inter-course⁶ is the single most common mode of transmission of AIDS in our country. The international air travel makes it easy for these diseases to spread over the world. Other debiting diseases may lead to a loss of manpowers, but

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do not normally wipe out economically active generation. They do not trample all over the intensely personal sphere of sexual relationship, making even marriage a high risk activity. Malaria keeps to its clinical confines, it does not oblige taxi driver to hand out condoms. Tuberculosis does not make blood banks into transfusers of death. HIV subverts not just health but also our social, cultural and economic assumptions having significant impact on national progress. It thus lowers the country's Human Development Index (HDI)

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

The AIDS/HIV is preventable but not curable. The presently available medicines do not control this virus completely and their impact is of short stay. Also the medicines are costly and out of reach of common man.

In India, an ayurvedic doctor in Kerala claims to search out AIDS treatment⁷ but upto what extent his 'Immuno Cure' medicine is successful it is to be examined and analysed in the world of medicine. There are about 65 government run centres and hospitals in our country to test blood sample, the biggest network being in Maharashtra (at Bombay, Pune and Nagpur). Besides, facility is available at nine surveillance centres (one centre being in P.G. Medical College & Hospital, Rohtak, Haryana in its microbiology department since September, 1986) and two zonal transfusion centres run by the Defence forces.⁸

Recently the Scientists claim break through in AIDS treatment based on the latest results of the one of the world's largest clinical trials of HIV drugs involving thousands of patients.⁹

Britain Medical Research Council, which took a lead in investigation, recommended that AIDS patients should begin taking a combination of at least two anti HIV drugs.

The drugs in question are compounds known to interfere with the ability of HIV to replicate. One of them AZT made by the British Company Wellcome, has been used since 1986 but was partially effective as a single drug therapy after it was shown in 1993 that to prevent healthy HIV positive people from developing AIDS.¹⁰

However AZT used together with one of the two other anti-viral drugs DDI & DDC, made by Bristol Myers Squibb of U.S. and Roche of Switzerland respectively, reduced the death rate comparatively to those who took AZT alone¹¹.

These results renew hope, improve current treatment and thus encourage researchers looking at other combination of drugs. No matter it does not provide complete answer to AIDS and also does not prevent it.

WHO programme also supports research into more effective ways of encouraging safer sexual behaviour. It coordinates the international search for vaccines, vaginally applied creams and tablets that could neutralise HIV, and products for improved prevention and care.

Social Response to AIDS

Untouchable

The AIDS victim is treated as if untouchable. Every one wants to avoid his presence. He is disowned by his own family members.

Apathy of Medical Personnel

The attitude of the doctors and nurses is generally unsupporting. They shrink back from his mere touch. Many AIDS victims are refused admission in the major hospital on account of their critical conditions. AIMS refused to admit a patient (named Vipen)¹² on the pretext that there is long waiting list and referred him to Safdarjung hospital. One doctor turned him away saying that there was no facility for HIV infected patients and told to return to AIMS. No one touched him despite his high fever and critical condition.

Mental Agony

All this increases mental agony of HIV infected patient. Society and doctors create more problems. Doctors stand far away touching the patient with needle. Many people may, thus, give up hope and commit suicide.

How to combat these responses

In our country health education and communication component is very poor. We are lacking motivated and trained health workers with basic knowledge of the diseases. The drugs are very costly beyond the reach of the poor. The scarcity of testing centres is also one of the problems to combat the AIDS epidemic. Frequent services are not available to provide information about this dreadful diseases - its symptoms - like fever and weight loss, in AIDS what to do ? and what not to do ? The medical science has not come to that level to control and cure it.

It is really a challenge to Science and society. It is urgent need to tackle this problem fairly and squarely. The following factors may be helpful to control it as its cure is not yet possible.

Health Education and Service

It is the foremost requirement to combat this diseases. The policy makers be forced to introduce such education and appropriate service for diagnosis and drug supply. It can minimise teen age pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STD).

Promoting safe sex could revitalise the morbid family planning programme for socio economic developments, the condom promotion, the treatment of other sexually transmitted diseases and School Education on HIV/AIDS may prove helpful to reduce its adverse effects / to counter the AIDS threat.

Because the extent of the ignorance and misconception about sex is very apparent and certainly dangerous. The W.H.O. estimated that 20-25% of HIV infections are likely to occur in the age group of 10-25 years. 15 million adolescent females married or unmarried become pregnant every year.¹³

Talking sex to children :AIDS awareness programmes may include information on puberty,intercourse and sodomy. Parents must be more concerned with such information to protect their children through sex education or health education or family life education, whatever the name may be. WHO global programme on AIDS in 1994 emphasised that sex education actually postpones the initiation of inter course and promotes the effective use of contraception.¹⁴ It will not promote sexual experimentation. It will rather prepare the children against the threat of AIDS.

However, such programmes should be according to their needs and levels of their awareness. They might have seen blue films but their knowledge of the scientific aspects of puberty and repro duction remains poor. What they know should be correct.

But it is ground reality that there is very little to really educate the youth about its seriousness and the ways to prevent it. Because in the present scenario the society is becoming more and more liberal in its outlook towards relationship between sexes, and morality is being defined a new and at the same time a monster like AIDS is ever ready to gobble up the wayward genera tion of the nineties.

Voluntary Organisations like "Helpline" are awaring the people against AIDS as there is warning from Indian Health Organisation that without awareness 10 thousand people may die of AIDS daily by 2000.

Missionary Workers (With vision and commitment) : Non-governmental and community based organisations, missionaries and public and private bodies can certainly reduce the pressure to provide physical, emotional and spiritual relief against such dreadful diseases. Such organisations/institutions will help to improve the health system which is essential to counter such menace. The triangular formula- Information,Education and Commu nication will be helpful to control and cure this epidemic as the people will be made aware of its dreadful effect.

Individual Centre/Protective Home : Should be established so that HIV/AIDS infected patients may be attended to there round the clock.

Free Diagnosis & Drugs : An early detection is vital part of treatment. The free diagnosis and drugs are to be made available for such victims. Because without continuous supply of drugs it is impossible to cure the victim.

Quarrantine : i.e. keeping aloof persons thought to be exposed to nonendemic diseases, is also a helpful step to combat such dis eases. The persons/foreigners coming from the effected/infected zone should be given serious attention to check and observe the dangerous effect, if any.

Indian Culture Value : Surprisingly, a sperm bank is to be established here with foreign collaboration for healthy, intelligent and athletic product(of human being).

If such bank is established in India inspite of all violating dignity and respect due human creation, destroying sacred bonds of marriage and for unmarried a target of social disapproval and being a technological form of adultery, will be problematic situa tion.

Can Indian culture afford such business of sperm like a commodity and specially when AIDS like dreadful epedemic are emerging in the polluted environment. A lawa, in this

regard, shall have to be enacted to stop/control such establishment, to maintain/pre serve our social and cultural values.

Legal sanction to sex workers : Would prevent AIDS. The legislative world stop child prostitution. Regular health check-ups and blood tests will control AIDS. Legislation of profession and licences for sex workers, would help them to convince the customers in a better way for the use of condoms and spreading of HIV virus will be checked. The constant surveillance and monitoring research activities can make the programme successful.

Legal issue vis-a-vis Homo sexuality

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, dealing with "unnatural offences" categorically prohibits homo-sexuality and sodomy. Though a law enacted in England in 1967 allowed homosexuality, yet in India there is no such law. So long as section 377 of IPS exists in the statute book one cannot think of allowing homosexuality and sodomy anywhere. Any institution/person, found propagating it is liable to be convicted under section 107 of IPC for abetment of crimes for which the punishment is 10 years.

Thus there is no such problem in India as is in other countries where homosexuality can flourish. A law in this regard shall have to be enacted by other countries on the line of our statute so that the AIDS like epidemic may be minimised.

Conclusion

Various seminars and conferences which are being organised nationally and internationally (as in Chiang Mai-Thailand) are playing vital role to find out ways and means to combat this dreadful diseases. Information, education and communication are proved to be essential to face this challenge. Medical Science is on its way to tackle this problem fairly. Though complete answer is not available with the scientists yet they claim a breakthrough in AIDS treatment. A country like ours can hardly afford to counter the diseases as it costs high. Still to protect the human rights something has to be done to control it. A law in this regard i.e. for sex workers, drug addicts, and for professional blood donors shall have to be made to implement and follow honestly and strictly. A vision and commitment of society is also essential to counter its dreadful effects.

Human behaviour shall have to be changed without fail. A victim of AIDS, who needs sympathy and support from society, specially the doctors, shall have to be properly looked after instead of ignoring him to decrease his mental agony. A physical, emotional and spiritual relief is essential for the AIDS patient which can be imparted through missionary workers, NGOs and WHO. Otherwise national / international progress will be hampered. So a conducive environment is essential to check and control the epidemic so as to protect human rights specially those of adults and children who are the national assets of the day.

Foot Notes

1. Combating AIDS - The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, Sept.20 ,1995, p.16, col. 1.
2. Dainik Tribune, Chandigarh,3-10-95(haryana Special)
3. Maharashtra Leads in AIDS, H.T. 29-9-95, p.12, col. 5.
4. Ibid.
 - a. Maharashtra leads in AIDS cases,H.T. 29-9-95,p.12,col. 5
 - b. Ibid
 - c. Ibid
5. Indian women helpless prey to AIDS, The Times of India, New Delhi, 12-7-94, p.6
6. Ratio of Transmission of AIDS in India :

By Hetro-sexual intercourse	=	42.20%
By Blood donors	=	15.53%
By Intravenous & drug users	=	11.90%

Maharashtra lead in AIDS,H.T. 29-9-95,p.12,col.6
7. Dainik Tribune, Chandigarh(Haryana Special) 3-10-95
8. Total number of seropositive cases include about 1000 men from 3 wings of Indian Army or their spouses and 150 from paramilitary forces like BSF and CRPF. The Hindustan Times 29-9-95,p.12,col.5
9. Scientists claim brekthrough in AIDS treatment, The Hindustan Times, New Delhi,1-10-95, p.1, col. 1.
10. Ibid. , col. 2
11. Ibid., col. 3
12. 14 years old wages a lone battle against HIV, The Times of India, New Delhi,Sept. 13,1995, p.1, col. 2
13. The Times of India - The Sunday Review - October 29,1995p.9,col. 3.
14. Ibid.
- 15: Helpline to guide the adoloscent, The Times of India New Delhi,16-9-95,p.3,col.4.
16. AIDS-Ke Phelne Kee Vyapak Chetawani, Dainik Tribune, Chd.13-9-95,p.3,col.8.
17. Fathers to order : the ethics of Sperm Sole, The Times of India(Science & Medicine) New Delhi, 6-12-94, p.17,col.2.
18. See also Condoms for gay lacks legal sanction, The Times of India, March 6,1995,p.6, col.8.