

Press release

Urgent action needed to improve access to HIV prevention and treatment services for people who inject drugs

Warsaw, Poland, 14 May 2007 – Despite increased political commitment and funding for the AIDS response, most people who inject drugs are still being denied access to basic HIV prevention and treatment services, said UNAIDS at the 18th Conference on Drug Related Harm in Poland.

The number of people who inject drugs globally was estimated at over 13 million at the end of 2005, yet only 8% have access to some kind of HIV prevention service. Access to antiretroviral therapy among this group is unacceptably low due in part to lack of information, exclusion and widespread stigma and discrimination.

“About 10% of all new HIV infections worldwide are attributable to injecting drug use—if you exclude Africa, that figure rises to 30%,” said Mr Prasada Rao, UNAIDS Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, in his key note address at the opening of the conference. “Evidence shows that HIV prevention programmes are particularly effective among people who inject drugs but they are regularly denied access to information and services.”

Injecting drug use is known to be a major mode of HIV transmission in South East Asia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, but as outlined in the United Nations Secretary General’s 2007 progress report, it has also recently emerged as a new factor for HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Republic of Tanzania.

Evidence and experience shows that focused HIV programmes for injecting drug users make a difference. In Portugal, where harm reduction programmes were significantly scaled up, HIV diagnoses among injecting drug users were almost one third lower in 2005 than in 2001 after the introduction of focused harm reduction programmes.

“The allocation of financial resources must be used in more strategic and innovative ways to deliver more effective prevention programmes to people most at risk of HIV infection,” said Mr Rao. “In those countries where injecting drug use is driving the AIDS epidemic, focused harm reduction programmes which reach people who inject drugs must be built into the national AIDS plans.”

In 2006, at the UN General Assembly High Level Meeting on AIDS in New York, member states set the agenda to move towards universal access to HIV prevention and treatment. This included specific recommendations for effective HIV prevention services for key population groups including people who inject drugs.

Contact

Sophie Barton-Knott | UNAIDS Geneva | +41 22 791 1697 | bartonknotts@unaids.org

UNAIDS is an innovative joint venture of the United Nations, bringing together the efforts and resources of the UNAIDS Secretariat and ten UN system organizations to respond to AIDS. The Secretariat headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland with staff on the ground in more than 80 countries. Coherent action on AIDS by the UN system is coordinated in countries through the UN theme groups, and the joint programmes on AIDS. Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Visit the UNAIDS Web site at www.unaids.org