Concept

Building a stronger HIV prevention movement in Asia

Wednesday 6 – Friday 8 March 2019 | WP1663

In partnership with: Global Health Group at the University of California, San Francisco and Gilead Sciences

To be held in Singapore

Summary

Asia has a high and increasing burden of HIV. This Wilton Park dialogue will focus on how to reduce new HIV infections in the region, sharing lessons and building momentum to expand prevention policies and programmes.

Context

Currently, it is estimated that approximately 5.2 million people are living with HIV in Asia, the second highest number of any region in the world. As a whole, the Asian region has made great strides in its response to the HIV epidemic. However, progress achieved varies greatly by country – while some are on track to meet international goals, others are experiencing rapid expansions of the epidemic. Progress is also variable across indicators. For example, though more than half of people living with HIV (PLWHIV) in Asia are on treatment, access to HIV prevention services continues to lag.

Regionally, the number of new HIV infections has decreased by 14% since 2010 with considerable declines in countries with mature epidemics. However, this progress is offset by rising numbers of new HIV infections in a subset of countries. For example, Hong Kong, Thailand and Vietnam lead the Asian region in reduction of new HIV infections, while the Philippines, Taiwan and Singapore have seen a rise in HIV incidence. In Thailand, the number of new HIV infections declined by 50% between 2010 and 2016, yet the Philippines has experienced a 174% increase in HIV since 2010 and faces the fastest growing epidemic in the region.

Increases in new HIV infections regionally is largely driven by key populations. Incidence of HIV among men who have sex with men (MSM) is also increasing in several high-burden countries. In fact, MSM made up 29% of new infections in 2017 in Asia, second only to clients of sex workers (35%). Within key populations, HIV risk among young people is emerging as a serious problem, with new infections among people aged 15-24 years on the rise over the past decade.
Despite the overall decline in new HIV infections in Asia, there are several trends that, if left unaddressed, could jeopardise gains made to date. For this reason, HIV prevention response should be closely coordinated with policies and programmes that address HIV across the care continuum. For example, regulatory barriers slow access to innovative tools and financing sustainable HIV treatment programmes remains a major challenge in the region as well. More can be done to ensure that all patients have access to the HIV prevention and treatment services they need.

**Available tools and barriers to HIV prevention in Asia**

The toolbox of effective HIV prevention strategies and interventions has grown substantially in recent years to include a wide variety of tools – from condoms, clean syringes and voluntary male medical circumcision to universal screening, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and treatment as prevention (TaSP). In Asia, availability of these tools varies by country and is influenced heavily by cultural norms, political will, and the availability of financial resources.

Significant barriers to access of HIV prevention and treatment tools in Asia include stigmatised views of people living with HIV, particularly in health care settings, and punitive laws which discourage those most at-risk from seeking care. Asia is home to one-third of the global population of people who inject drugs (PWIDs). Insufficient coverage of harm reduction services threatens further progress in reducing transmission among PWIDs, who are very often criminalised and incarcerated.

Moreover, though many countries in Asia have widely adopted policies that support comprehensive HIV and sexual education, implementation of these programmes can be weak or sporadic. Less than 50% of young people in the region have comprehensive knowledge of HIV; reducing HIV in Asia will therefore require innovative and community-driven approaches to overcome these significant socio-cultural challenges.

Also, of note is the low uptake of condom use among key populations (namely MSM and PWIDs, particularly in the 15-24 age range) in several high-burden countries in Asia with particularly high HIV infections among MSM in urban cities. This underscores the need for an approach to HIV prevention that takes location into account and targets messages and dissemination strategies appropriately to its audience.

Limited uptake of new prevention tools may result from the slow pace of introduction of cutting-edge technologies and a dependence on international financing to fund prevention efforts. There are signs that this is changing, however. As of March 2018, PrEP, for example, was available, though often on a limited basis, to MSM in eight countries in the region.

Despite available tools for the prevention of HIV, management of HIV testing and treatment remains a critical challenge in preventing transmission and reducing HIV in Asia. In 2017, it was estimated that 74% of PLWHIV in Asia know their status, which amounts to roughly 1.4 million who do not know their HIV status. Several countries currently implement comprehensive and anonymous testing with online patient access, while improving access and diagnosis for hard-to-reach populations can be a challenge. Moreover, opt-out testing and privacy regulations could be further developed to encourage uptake of testing services.

Once diagnosed, linking patients to care – whether to preventative services to remain HIV-negative or treatment – also deserves attention. According to UNAIDS in 2017, just over half of PLWHIV in Asia were receiving ART, leaving roughly 1.8 million PLWHIV without the lifesaving treatment they need to stay virally suppressed and reduce the chances of spreading the disease. In order to meet the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets in Asia, improving screening and linkage to care will be key.
Objectives

This Wilton Park meeting will convene high-level stakeholders – policymakers, researchers, clinicians, advocates, implementers and industry representatives – to identify ways to overcome HIV prevention implementation challenges across Asia, share best practices and accelerate progress that is already underway. Themes and key questions that may be discussed include:

A spotlight on policy
- Which national initiatives or strategies have effectively increased uptake of HIV prevention and linkage to care services in Asian countries?
- How can regional leadership inform or support national and sub-national HIV prevention efforts?
- What prevention programming can be effective in environments that criminalise homosexuality, sex work and injection drug use?

Making the case for prevention
- How have groups successfully demonstrated to governments the value of HIV prevention?
- What research is needed on HIV prevention in Asian countries to support broader commitments from health ministries?
- What educational initiatives have proven successful in advancing scale-up of screening, treatment as prevention, and innovative prevention tools in Asia?

Amplifying successful and innovative programmes
- What support do community and patient groups need from government agencies and multilateral organisations to extend their reach in HIV prevention and linkage to care?
- What can non-traditional organisations do to help design and deliver differentiated HIV prevention and linkage to care?
- What new technologies and tools can be adopted to bring HIV prevention and linkage to care to scale?

Why Wilton Park

Wilton Park’s convening role enables it to bring together communities who do not usually or often meet, for off-the-record round-table discussions, facilitated by a Wilton Park Programme Director. The informal atmosphere and residential nature stimulates frank, open discussions and valuable networking. The Wilton Park team will design the programme to maximise the impact, working as closely with partners as desired, organise invitations and logistics, and host and facilitate the meeting at a venue in Singapore.

This meeting will build upon Wilton Park’s global health focus, including a series on HIV. Recent discussions included Building a stronger HIV prevention movement in sub-Saharan Africa held in Namibia in March 2017, and Slowing the HIV and HCV epidemics among people who inject drugs held in the United Kingdom in February 2018.

Sources

UNAIDS AIDS Info database: http://aidsinfo.unaids.org/


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