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cc:
Subject: pagina web Sr Calvani

Experts recognise methadone treatment's role in reducing HIV infections

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The prevention of HIV transmission in drug users is a major challenge for health authorities around the world, and the methadone treatment programme is a main feature of the harm-reduction strategy for drug users in Hong Kong.

The remark was made by the Director of Health, Dr Lam Ping-yan, today (October 22) when he officiated at the opening ceremony of the Training Workshop on Methadone Treatment for HIV Prevention at Lam Woo International Conference Centre.

Attended by some 100 representatives from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Thailand, China, Hong Kong, Nepal, Vietnam and the US, the three-day workshop is organised by the United Nations Regional Task Force on Drug Use and HIV Vulnerability in collaboration with the UNAIDS South East Asia and Pacific Inter-country Team, the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, the UNDCP Regional Centre for the East Asia and the Pacific and the Hong Kong Red Ribbon Centre.

Observing that the HIV epidemic is growing in Asia, Dr Lam said about 250 new infections are reported to the Hong Kong Department of Health (DH) each year.

"The prevalence, however, has remained low at less than 0.1% in the adult population, and injection drug use accounts for less than 3% of the reported infections.

"Compared to the worsening HIV situation in many Asian countries, we take comfort that Hong Kong has benefited from the methadone treatment programme," Dr Lam said.

He also noted that Hong Kong's network of 20 methadone clinics had also been fulfilling its public health objective through the establishment of an HIV surveillance system, introduction of behavioural surveillance, organisation of health promotion activities including condom distribution, and the provision of effective means of disease prevention.

"With the support of the Hong Kong AIDS Trust Fund and the UNAIDS, the DH established the Red Ribbon Centre to share experience with counterparts around the world, particularly Southeast Asia and the Mainland.

"Promotion of methadone maintenance for achieving harm reduction is one of the core activities of the centre," Dr Lam said.

Mr Sandro Calvani, representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific), who also officiated at the opening ceremony, said the workshop illustrated a continuing process of highlighting and advocating science-based evidence approaches -- the so-called "best practices" -- that reduce harm from drug abuse.

"Hopefully, the three-day workshop will further foster regional practical actions at country and regional levels by governments with the support of international agencies."

Mr Calvani said that injection drug use is the major vector that transmits the HIV virus to the general population in most countries in Southeast Asia.

"As the leading UN drug control programme, UNODC thinks that the entry point in drug treatment and related services to decrease harm from drug abuse, is drug users, their health, that of their partners, that of their communities and their right to effective and efficient responses to their particularly vulnerable situations," he noted.

He said the UN position paper on preventing the transmission of HIV among drug abusers represents a comprehensive framework under which all UN agencies unite with one voice and one aim: reducing HIV infection among drug users and especially injection drug users and their partners.

The UN position paper says that HIV/AIDS education, access to condoms and clean syringes, counseling and drug abuse treatment can slow down and even reverse HIV trends, and that longer retention in treatment is associated with the reduction of HIV risk behavior.

"It is not only important to implement methadone programmes urgently but also to implement them with those features that ensure quality to prevent the inappropriate adaptation of international good practices.

"The outcome of the workshop will provide a sound technical footing for the national adaptations that are so urgently needed," Mr Calvani said.

The Commissioner for Narcotics, Mrs Rosanna Ure, agreed with Dr Lam and Mr Calvani that the growth of AIDS infection in East and Southeast Asia is closely linked with drug abuse and that the prevalence of AIDS infection rises among drug users who share needles.

She said that with the implementation of a methadone treatment programme in Hong Kong, AIDS infections among local drug abusers had remained low.

"Up to the second quarter of 2003, the cumulative total number of reported HIV infections in Hong Kong since 1984 was 2,116, of which only 56 infections were related to needle-sharing by drug users," she said.

A pilot project on universal HIV urine testing aiming at early diagnosis and treatment of HIV-infected patients was launched by the Department of Health in July. Mrs Ure said that subject to evaluation of the results of the project, HIV urine testing may be extended to all methadone clinics to make the methadone treatment programme even more effective for AIDS surveillance and prevention in Hong Kong.

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