



**SEAR/PR 1531**

### **Two out of three HIV patients in South-East Asia do not get life-saving drugs**

**Jaipur, 8 September 2011:**

Delay in diagnosing HIV infection, continuing stigma, the high cost of the drugs for treating the disease, and limited health system capacity is preventing more than a million people in South-East Asia from receiving vital HIV treatment, prevention and care. Concerned at these alarming numbers, the 11 Member States of the Region endorsed WHO's "Regional Health Sector Strategy on HIV (2011-2015)" in Jaipur, India today. WHO is urging countries to prioritize advocacy for reducing drug prices, train and sensitize health workers and minimize HIV-related stigma in healthcare settings. HIV testing and counselling need to be decentralized to enable people to know their HIV status.

More than two out of three HIV-infected people in need of treatment do not receive life-saving antiretroviral treatment in WHO's South-East Asia Region. Only 577 000 people – 32% of those in need receive this treatment. India and Thailand have successfully scaled up their antiretroviral programmes. The Region has the second highest burden of HIV in the world after sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 3.5 million people infected and 230 000 AIDS-related deaths.

"Unsafe sex and injecting drug use are driving this epidemic even today," said Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO Regional Director South-East Asia. "Unless we reach these high-risk, and marginalized sections of society – sex workers, injecting drug users, men who have sex with men – HIV/AIDS will remain a major health, social and economic challenge in our countries" he added. He also pointed out, "Babies acquire the infection from their HIV-positive mothers, either in the womb or through breastmilk, and we must reach these mothers." Following the new WHO guidelines can reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV to less than 5% even in breastfeeding mothers.

Although significant progress has been made, with a 31% reduction in the number of new infections between 2001 and 2009, much remains to be achieved. An estimated 1.3 million women aged 15 and above currently live with HIV in the Region. The estimated number of children living with HIV increased by 46% during 2001 – 2009. Of the 448 million cases of sexually transmitted infections that occur globally, 71 million are accounted for in South-East Asia.

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Through this Regional Strategy, WHO urges countries to achieve universal access to comprehensive HIV prevention, treatment and care and to contribute to health related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly MDG 6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases). To ensure this, primary healthcare needs to be revitalized, and health services integrated to strengthen links between HIV, TB, sexual, reproductive health and maternal and child health. The goals are guided by principles that include tackling the social determinants of health that both drive the epidemic and hinder the response; protecting human rights and promoting gender equity; and integrating HIV and other health services.

WHO will focus on four strategic directions to achieve these goals:

- To optimize HIV prevention, care and treatment. This includes preventing sexual transmission of HIV; eliminating congenital syphilis; access to safe blood transfusion; comprehensive and integrated services for sex workers, men who have sex with men, people who use drugs, young, displaced, mobile and migrant populations.
- To strengthen strategic information systems for HIV and research, as information on the various aspects of the issue is crucial in guiding policy and programme decision-making.
- Strengthening health systems so that HIV services are part of other essential services that are available, accessible and affordable.
- Finally, creating a supportive environment to ensure that everyone has equitable access to HIV services.

***For more information please contact:***

*Ms Vismita Gupta-Smith, Public Information and Advocacy Officer, WHO South-East Asia Regional Office (SEARO), New Delhi, Tel: 91-11-23309401, mobile + 91 9871329861, e-mail: [guptasmithv@searo.who.int](mailto:guptasmithv@searo.who.int), or Dr Supriya Bezbaruah, Communication Officer, Department of Communicable Diseases, WHO-SEARO. Tel + 91 11 23370804 ext 26584; mobile: + 919958994671, email: [bezbaruahs@searo.who.int](mailto:bezbaruahs@searo.who.int)*

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