

Kabul's Drug Epidemic Requires Unique Approaches in HIV/AIDS Prevention

By Abby Tan and Jennifer Francis

KABUL—The war in Afghanistan, combined with the easy availability of heroin, has spawned an explosion in illegal drug use on the streets of the nation's capital city of Kabul. The country remains one of the world's top producers of heroin and Kabul's residents increasingly turn to it to escape the traumas of continuing instability, unemployment, and poverty.

The increased drug use and subsequent rise in HIV/AIDS infections caused by sharing needles will continue to be a major concern in the foreseeable future, say representatives of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) working at a center run by the Social Development Drug Rehabilitation and Medical Services (NEJAT) in Kabul.

ADB supports the NEJAT Center as a pilot initiative under its NGO Initiatives to Prevent HIV/AIDS project. The center, located in the pockmarked southern suburbs of Kabul, was set up in 2002 and founded by a group of NGOs. It is the oldest drug treatment and rehabilitation facility in Afghanistan. The extraordinary circumstances in Kabul have led NEJAT to undertake some unusual approaches.

To prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS among those who inject drugs, NEJAT is giving away new syringes in exchange for used ones. This is a measure adapted from projects in other countries that have successfully curtailed the spread of HIV/AIDS and is designed to minimize the harm caused by injecting drugs.

While it may seem contradictory to the aim of reducing drug dependency and the spread of HIV/AIDS, NEJAT Center says the measure is an immediate and urgent response to unhygienic conditions and habits that easily lead to HIV. The center also offers drug rehabilitation services, but is unable to accept more than 40 patients at any given time. In addition, the center raises awareness about HIV/AIDS.

Injecting drug users are taught basic hygiene and the proper way to inject drugs. Most users are homeless and populate the dark alleys of Kabul where there is no water for bathing and even less knowledge of how to dress wounds caused by incorrect injections. NEJAT also provides new clothes and a visit to the barber.

NGOs recognize they can do little to curtail the supply of the drugs—a political and economic



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On the streets of Afghanistan's capital city, instability, unemployment, and poverty issues are apparent.

challenge for the government. However, NGOs can play a significant role in reducing demand for the drugs.

The center is developing a public awareness campaign on abstinence and on the perils of drug injections in relation to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Current estimates put the number of injecting drug users in Kabul City at more than 1,000. Of those who have been tested, 3.7% are positive for HIV/AIDS and 42% for hepatitis C, while 3.5% suffer from sexually transmitted infections.

The NEJAT Center's outreach activities aim to raise awareness and motivate drug users to seek treatment. They were primarily aimed at reducing harm for the drug users, and helping them avoid transmitting HIV infections to their unborn children. The NEJAT team focuses on needle/syringe exchange, wound management, and collecting old syringes from the streets.

An ambulance service is also provided. Hospitals in Kabul refuse to accept drug addicts for treatment unless someone takes responsibility for them so NEJAT's outreach team has created a referral system.

The first quarterly report of the NGO Initia-

tives to Prevent HIV/AIDS project notes there is already a positive change: a number of users are changing their behavior. Some have undergone voluntary testing while others have enrolled in the treatment program.

For those enrolled in the treatment program, individual and family counseling has been provided to help the reintegration of the drug users into their families and the community.

NEJAT services are free, and the center provides a separate facility for women and child drug users in the old Kharabat district of Kabul. Wives and children of drug addicts who are subject to domestic violence receive counseling.

The drug-related problems of Kabul remain immense. A bigger challenge for example is reaching out to the sex workers. Since Afghan society ostracizes sex workers, they are generally too intimidated to insist on condom use. The outreach team can only provide general awareness information among the population on the dangers of HIV and sexually transmitted infections through unprotected sex. Compared with the needs, NEJAT's resources are miniscule. The center needs more assistance and continues to work closely with other service providers to stop a HIV/AIDS pandemic from sweeping across Afghanistan. ■

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