



Facing the Challenges of HIV/AIDS in Our Region

Expert Group on HIV/AIDS

www.ndphs.org/?database=view,paper,20

Fact sheet 5/2008

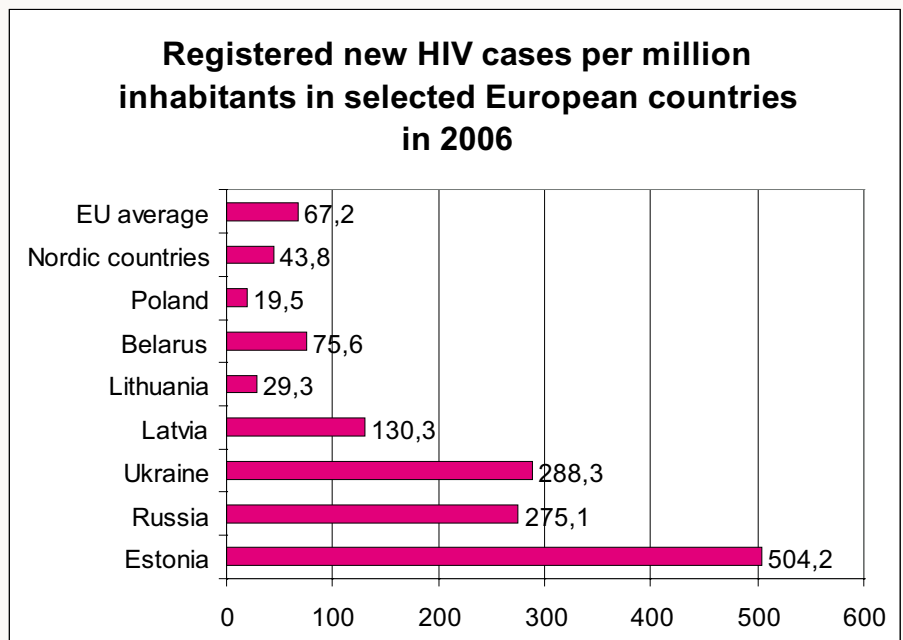
Why HIV/AIDS is an important issue

HIV/AIDS is one of the most serious soft security threats in the countries of the Baltic Sea region. Unsafe injection of illegal drugs and unsafe sexual behaviour without the use of condom protection are the main contributors to an increase in HIV cases. Social sources of this disease include, but are not limited to association with increased risk scenarios such as: prostitution, human traffic, drug abuse and immigration from countries worst hit by the epidemic. For obvious reasons, the HIV/AIDS can be seen as a challenge not only to the overall health policies of national states, but also to the wider sectors of society, including political structures. Therefore, a holistic approach and multinational efforts are needed in the region to defeat the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Gaps and challenges to address

All challenges are multifaceted and will only be addressed by taking into consideration different aspects, here we have outlined a few of the push and pull factors of HIV/AIDS:

- Within the past decade, all countries in the Baltic Sea Region have faced an increase in the infection rate of HIV/AIDS. However, there are striking differences between the countries in the region as to the prevalence of HIV-infection, which are due to variations in lifestyles and schemes to address HIV/AIDS in the region;
- The political and social impact of HIV is more severe on the South-Eastern side of the Baltic Sea Region. For instance, Estonia has the second highest estimated prevalence of HIV in Europe – over 1% of the adult population as estimated for the whole country; while in some cities of Estonia up to 5% of adult population may be infected. Russia faces one of the world's fastest growing HIV epidemics. The cumulative number of officially registered HIV cases in Russia was almost 0.5% of the total population in 2007. However, the real number of infected people is higher than official statistics suggests, and also there the regional differences are very big. Drug abuse with needles is the overwhelmingly most important risk factor for new HIV infection rates in this area. The particularly notorious case is the Kaliningrad region, which has been one of the first areas in the Baltic Sea Region to show a severe epidemic among the drug users, and is still marred by a rapidly spreading epidemic;
- In spite of having had for many years a more or less stable infection rate of HIV/AIDS, Nordic countries now face a continuous rise in the annual numbers of reported cases. As is the case in Germany, the main risk factor can be attributed to the increasing number of infections among men who have sex with men. The problem also has connections to the increased immigration from endemic countries and regions. The prevention among the migrant population calls for special attention, since it requires culture-sensitive interventions.



Source: www.eurohiv.org

The impact of HIV/AIDS on our societies cannot be underestimated

The spread of HIV/AIDS does not only contribute to a major health problem plundering our societies. It also has far-reaching consequences for the political, economic and social development of the countries in our region and beyond it. Most experts believe that the future demographic development will be severely affected by HIV in the worst hit countries in our region. The disease may cause a reduction in the population, reduce the working power and directly and indirectly snap off several percent units from the GNP.

The problem of HIV infection persists even for resource-rich Northern countries. In all countries in our region most socially marginalized populations face the greatest risk of contracting HIV and some are among those least likely to be able to afford treatment. Stigmatized and often discriminated against, these sectors of the population are at greatest risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and are also more than likely to remain untested and untreated, threatening to spread the epidemic further.

What should be done

Actions that the NDPHS Expert Group on HIV/AIDS recommends should be taken include multi-sectoral efforts to counteract the further spread of HIV/AIDS, such as:

- Collection of precise and up-to-date information about the dynamics of the spread of the HIV/AIDS in our region, its underlying risk factors, and the social and political consequences for the area;
- Projects aimed at identifying the needs of and opportunities for cooperation and joint cross-border activities between areas with similar epidemiological situations. One example is to develop a project between Narva and Ivangorod aimed at developing preventive interventions towards injecting drug users;
- Projects aimed at identifying opportunities for the establishment and promotion of effective Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) with a special emphasis on reaching the most vulnerable groups. The key instruments and mechanisms should include non-discriminating access to medical and social services, supporting secondary prevention and treatment, and harm reduction of drug dependence.

The role of the NDPHS

The NDPHS plans to encourage and support regional efforts to make the above mentioned recommendations a reality. This will be done through financing relevant demonstration projects and supporting their implementation. Also, the Expert Group will continue monitoring the situation in the region and will periodically issue evaluations and recommendations for further action and stimulate political dialogue on the HIV/AIDS topic.

Learn more

This fact sheet has been developed on the basis of a report "HIV/AIDS in the Baltic Sea Region and Northwest Russia," which was developed by the NDPHS Expert Group on HIV/AIDS and can be downloaded in "Papers" section of the NDPHS Database (www.ndphs.org/?database).

Further information about this Expert Group and its activities can be found on the NDPHS website at www.ndphs.org/?hiv-aids_eg and can be obtained from:

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