

HIV outbreak of Ratodero, Pakistan requires urgent concrete measures to avoid future outbreaks

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Dear Editor,

The outbreak of Ratodero, local scenario

Ratodero belongs to district Larkana, Sindh. The reported outbreak of HIV continues to escalate. The official number of confirmed HIV cases has been summarized in Table.¹ The outbreak is unprecedented since it involved 80% children. Previously there were 1200 HIV cases of children in whole Pakistan. In the wake of this outbreak, Sindh Health Care Commission (SHCC) sealed 147 clinics and blood transfusion centres in Larkana and more than 600 clinics were issued warning on questionable practices.^{2,3} With the grievous health crisis looming over Sindh, a WHO team classified the outbreak level as Grade-II emergency and provided technical assistance.⁴

The outbreak has raised serious apprehensions and the authorities must take concrete measures on the three aspects of the outbreak:

1. To offer optimal healthcare including provision of psycho-social support, and procurement of medicines and diagnostic kits. This is extremely important as the stocks of medicines and screening kits ran short. Thus, it is high time for planning to involve international organizations to sustain it.
2. There is a dire need to extend the current facilities to an optimal number which may respond to the huge influx of patients. There are only 7 HIV treatment facilities working all over Sindh (mostly in cities).
3. Local and national AIDS Control Programmes, Blood Banks and SHCC need to work in coordination to:
 - a. Curb the unsafe transfusion, especially through unregistered blood banks.
 - b. Provide interventions to stop spread from potential hotspots i.e. drug users, sex workers, transgenders and barbers' shops.

Table: Age/Gender Wise Break Up of HIV patients of Ratodero, Larkana.³

Age Group	Male	Female
0 to 1 Years	54	42
13 Months to 5 years	407	232
06-12 Years	94	72
Adults	59	172

- c. Develop an early warning system through effective surveillance.
- d. Check the menace of quackery (the major contributor in spread of the virus).
- e. Educate the masses on risk factors, consequences of spread and highly objectionable practices of using un-necessary injections and intravenous drips through national level awareness campaigns.

The outbreak of Kot-Imrana, Punjab

The outbreak of Ratodero is similar in many ways to the previously reported HIV outbreak in Kot-Imrana.⁵ The factors responsible for these outbreaks are common, for instance misuse of syringes by quack, drug addicts, multiple use of razors at barbers' shops, infected sex workers, improper disposal of hospital wastes and limited surveillance.

Regional scenario

In the region, India and Cambodia have demonstrated a promising decrease in the number of new registered cases through effective policy making. Contrary, in Pakistan, there is a 57% increase in the new cases of HIV (2010-18), the highest rise in the new cases of HIV in Asia.⁶ These outbreaks are just the tip of the iceberg. Experts believe, if vigorous actions would not be taken, Pakistan could face serious outbreaks in future for which consequences could be unimaginable.

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