



EUROPE

Press release

WHO CALLS FOR UNITED ACTION TO ADDRESS HIV IN EUROPE

21 July 2010, Vienna, Copenhagen -- A huge divide exists between Western and Eastern Europe in access to HIV services for people living with HIV, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

"While HIV epidemics in Western Europe are, with some exceptions, generally stabilizing, in many countries in Eastern Europe, they rage out of control," said Dr Andrew Ball, Senior Strategy and Operations Adviser of the HIV/AIDS Department at WHO Headquarters.

There were over 1.2 million reported HIV cases in Europe by the end 2008, with over 100 000 reported new infections during that year. The number of reported annual new cases is relatively stable in the West (about 20 000), but volatile and increasing in the East (about 80 000). Overall, Europe now has the fastest growing HIV epidemic in the world.

HIV on the continent is largely fuelled by injecting drug use. In some countries, over 50% of people living with HIV are injecting drug users (IDU). At the same time, major proportions of these people are also co-infected with tuberculosis and hepatitis C. In a large number of countries drug users are often stigmatized and excluded from health and social services, including HIV treatment.

Ukraine is one of the most severely affected countries in the region. The country has reported the largest annual number of new infections to date in 2008 -- over 15 000.

Ukraine has responded by distributing clean needles and syringes among IDU and established programmes for drug injectors including *opioid substitution therapy* which is proven by evidence to improve health of IDU, reducing their drug injecting behaviour that is fuelling the epidemic. "Treatment and prevention for drug users are proving to work in Ukraine," said Dr Olena Eschenko and Dr Natalia Nizova, Ministry of Health, Ukraine.

Moving West, HIV has become relatively stable, for example, in Portugal, the country that once had a grave HIV problem. "Brave moves to reduce harm of drug use and delivering prevention and treatment to people who inject drugs has turned the epidemic around," said Dr Henrique Barros, National AIDS Coordinator, Portugal.

"Glaring disparities in HIV/AIDS response between Western and Eastern Europe are unacceptable," said Mr Nikos Dedes, European Treatment Action Group, Greece. More united action is required in order to limit the rapid spread of the disease and improve treatment and care in the Eastern Europe.

"HIV in Europe depends on the access to services in the East," said Mr Martin Donoghoe, Programme Manager for HIV/AIDS, Sexually Transmitted Infections and Viral Hepatitis of the WHO Regional Office for Europe. "We also need to prevent the re-emergence of HIV epidemics in the West." Limiting the fast growth of HIV in Europe requires a much concerted action by all Governments and their partnering organizations across the region.

USEFUL LINKS

HIV/AIDS 2010: challenges in Europe:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/diseases-and-conditions/hivaids/sections/news/2010/8/aids-2010-challenges-in-europe>

WHO Regional Office for Europe on HIV/AIDS:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/diseases-and-conditions/hivaids>

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