

*DAWN*  
*9.11.03*  
'Pakistan is a low-prevalence country, but we cannot be complacent about that. The official number of Aids cases in the country is 235,' says Federal Health Minister Nasir Khan

**F**EDERAL Health Minister, Mohammad Nasir Khan will launch the *Enhanced National HIV-AIDS Control Programme* to be implemented all over the country with the assistance of the World Bank, signifying the government's commitment towards keeping the country free from the epidemic. This further reiterates the commitment for achieving the targets set during the UN General Assembly Special on HIV/Aids and the Millennium Summit.

The major thrust of the project is to check the spread of disease to the general adult

# Serious about Aids

*Healster*  
By Jonaid Iqbal

cent. However, we cannot be complacent about that, because if unchecked the disease can spread to general population very quickly and reach epidemic proportions. The numbers of cases of Aids reported to the Ministry are 235 to date.

There is no question that the actual situation may be otherwise, a number of Aids and HIV cases are not reported due to religious, social stigma and other taboos. We have a population of about 143 million people, and many of us get exposed to temptations of modern age and many risk factors are prevalent that can cause a sudden increase in the number of people infected e.g. increasing injecting drug use. There has been also tremendous enhancement in socio-economic status of certain class of people. Today it takes 14 hours to reach New York, and much less to get to Bangkok. Many people go there, including the young generation, and even many senior persons. A number of persons who travel abroad remain in the danger of getting exposed to HIV-Aids disease mainly due to lack of information.

We have to take immediate preventive steps and adopt

younger generation, especially women folk, as well as at the level of universities and colleges. I am not suggesting a pornographic attitude. But one has to inform our children also about the Aids menace.

To date no cure for Aids has been found. Medicines can only prolong the period of life span. So, it is very important to focus on the preventive side.

Q: People say that Aids, hepatitis, malaria and TB are interrelated? Has the Government devised plans to arrest the spread of these diseases with particular reference to measures taken about arresting the spread of Aids in Pakistan?

A: This is a wrong assumption. Hepatitis, Malaria, TB and HIV-Aids are not directly connected, the only connection being that all are diseases of poverty. However, hepatitis B and C and Aids share same modes of transmission and prevention i.e. through sexual contact, blood, re-use of syringes and from an infected mother to her baby. There is an Ordinance in force in Pakistan making it obligatory that all blood has to be screened for HIV, hepatitis B and C.

We also know of a direct link existing between Aids and TB,

Q: At one point, you were speaking of introducing awareness campaigns, and seeking services of different sections of society and inducting prayer leaders in this campaign. How much progress has been made?

A: We have been touch with political leaders and different political parties of all provinces. They have all joined together in making Pakistan polio free. Maulana Fazlur Rahman, and Qazi Hussain Ahmad are in the campaign for a polio free Pakistan. Other religious scholars, including Imams in the mosques are getting the message. In my last meeting in the NWFP with Health Minister, Mr Inayatullah, we had a very successful meeting with religious leaders, and most of them are now on board for polio, Aids, hepatitis and other communicable diseases.

Q: How is Pakistan coordinating with international agencies such as Who and UN in controlling Aids?

A: We have strong cooperation with all international agencies especially for infectious diseases e.g. with GAVI (General Alliance for Vaccination and Immunization) hepatitis B vaccination have been launched. Also we are one of the few countries in the world to have received global fund grant for

have been made in rural areas and small towns?

A: All tertiary hospitals are equipped with diagnostic facilities. However, a lot still remains to be done to combat this disease. One must understand there is no cure for HIV/Aids disease. It is pointless to talk of cure. Medicines can only serve to prolong life and/or mitigate pain. There is no vaccine in the world either as prophylactics (for treatment of Aids disease).

In Africa 25 million people have died as a consequence of Aids, and 42 million people are now suffering (from this disease). Antiretroviral drugs are available but are costly and unaffordable. Even a rich country like the United States cannot afford to provide this medicine for free because it would be beyond the capacity of US budget to pay. Prevention through awareness raising aimed at behaviour change are must for preventing this disease and keep it from spreading.

Q: There were also reports that the government spends nothing on providing medicines for patients suffering from Aids. Is it true?

A: I admit it was not being done in the past, but under the new project the issue is being addressed. This was launched on 20th October 2002 by