

Health - HIV

# Rate of HIV infection among

By Mukhtar Alam

KARACHI, May 27: Alarmed by the fact that there has been a steady increase in the number of HIV infections amongst injecting drug users (IDUs) in Larkana, the Sindh health department has decided to engage stakeholders in order to implement measures to contain the infection, before the disease spills over into the general population.

Sources in the health department say that following the third round of integrated behavioural and biological surveillance (IBBS) in Karachi, Hyderabad and Larkana in the first half of 2008, a combined team of Sindh HIV/Aids control officials and NGO representatives were tasked in March 2009 with exploring the prevalence of HIV infection amongst sex workers and their networks in Larkana.

The latest survey in Larkana was undertaken in 2009, and aimed to conduct HIV risk assessment amongst commercial sex workers, particularly transvestite sex workers (HSW), to understand the characteristics of various sexual networks, their operational dy-

namics and the linkages between various commercial sex workers (CSW) and their clients.

Dr Khalid Sheikh, Director (Development) of the Sindh Health department, told Dawn that a joint team comprising officials of the health department, the Sindh Aids Control Programme (SACP), the National Aids Control Programme (NACP) and UNAIDS will visit Larkana this week to identify what efforts have so far been undertaken against the virus, if any, by the local government and NGOs.

"We will first talk to various NGOs to find out about the service delivery packages for HIV/Aids affected persons and will formulate schemes to overcome the health problem in question. We will also ensure capacity building of private and public sector institutions that already exist or are likely to be established afresh," he added.

After the first outbreak of HIV/Aids amongst injecting drug users in Larkana in 2003, the authorities have been unable to control the spread of

the disease.

According to reports of two HIV second-generation surveys in Sindh, the HIV epidemic in Sindh continues to be driven by IDUs, while HSWs were also emerging as the second most high risk group. The coverage of service delivery packages/programmes for IDUs in Karachi should be immediately increased, while in Hyderabad and Larkana there is an immediate need to establish organised harm reduction services, said the 2008 surveillance report.

The report states that 27 per cent of the interviewed male sex workers (MSWs) in Karachi, one per cent in Hyderabad and 25.5 per cent in Larkana had heard about service delivery packages, while the rate of participation in each city was 21, 0.2 and 20.5 per cent respectively.

A total of 620 HSWs were included in the 2008 survey, whose average duration in the commercial sex trade was reported to be 11.9 years. The analysis showed that 50.3 per cent of the HSWs considered themselves to be at risk of acquiring HIV infection

in Karachi, as compared to 27.9 per cent in Hyderabad and 40.7 per cent in Larkana.

Another 1,197 were interviewed under the category of IDUs for the 2008 survey, out of which 30.2 per cent were more than 35 years of age. At least 43.8 per cent were unmarried and 42.5 per cent said they were married. Thirty six per cent of IDUs reported receiving their last injection from a professional injector or street doctor, and a similar percentage reported using a used syringe for their last injection.

Sex with a spouse or another female was reported by 33.4 per cent of IDUs. Sex with MSWs/HSWs in the past six months was reported by 11.4 per cent, while 13.9 per cent said they had had sex in exchange for drugs or money. The perception of infection risk varied from city to city, with 36.8 per cent of those polled in Karachi considering themselves at risk, 25 per cent in Hyderabad and 37.4 per cent in Larkana.

SACP officials say there has been a steady and continuous upsurge of in-

# ng IDUs on the rise

er fections among IDUs in Larkana, their number rising from 17 per cent in 2006-07 to 28 per cent in 2008. Further, HIV infection among other high risk groups, including HSWs, has increased from 14 per cent in 2006-07 to a staggering 27.3 per cent in 2008, an official said.

A report pertaining to the last risk situation report (published in 2009) said that a focus group discussion was held with HSWs, female sex workers (FSWs) and MSWs, along with a series of in-depth interviews with the groups, in Larkana for two days. Initial discussions focused on casual chit-chat followed by general health and hygiene questions and then discussions on HIV/Aids, the number and types of clients, contraceptive use and whether or not the sex workers sought voluntary counselling and testing.

The reports said that there were two groups of HSWs in the city: one group operated only in small motels/inns (musafir khanas) located on Station Road (the central business area of the city); the other group has fewer clients (one to three per day)

who were found either in social gatherings, by roaming around on the streets or through mobile phones.

HSWs reported a low rate of contraceptive use, particularly with clients who were not found at the musafir khanas. Their reported perception was that since their "clients are fewer and usually persons with cleaner hygiene and appearance", they could not contract HIV from them, hence making use of a contraceptive unnecessary.

HSWs also claimed that the majority of their clients were from Larkana, but there were those who come to the city from other places as well. They categorically reported to the survey team that they did not have sex with IDUs or drug users in general because of their "dirty appearance". In the case of FSWs, it was reported that even if they knew that a contraceptive could protect them against HIV, the self perception of risk was fairly low.

Consistent contraceptive use was reported by no one, the report included.

It is concluded in the report that commercial sex workers (males and

females) have inadequate knowledge about HIV/Aids in Larkana and as such there is a need to scale up the service delivery packages in order to reach a large proportion of the target population.

"The results from this study stand in contrast to the surveillance data, which showed a very high rate of condom use and high levels of HIV knowledge," the situation report added, saying that there exist absolutely no services for IDUs, which are urgently required as infection rates are consistently rising in this group.

Dr Qamar Abbas, Deputy Programme Manager of the Sindh Aids Control Programme said that the study required a process of formal discussions with the stakeholders in Larkana and the preparation of intervention plans and projects to attract foreign agencies. He said that "obviously the musafir khanas served as the hub of most high risk activities" and there is a dire need to pay attention to them and involve them as a part of the overall HIV prevention response in Larkana.