Figures talk: HIV/AIDS in the WHO European Region, 2012. Halting and reversing the spread of HIV by 2015 are at stake

Copenhagen, 27 November 2013

1. Steadily growing HIV epidemic

Since the start of the epidemic, more than 1.5 million people have been diagnosed with HIV in the WHO European Region, including 131 000 new HIV cases in 2012.

HIV attacks the immune system and causes lifelong severe illness with a long incubation period. The end-stage of the untreated infection, AIDS, results from the destruction of the immune system.

2. New HIV infections 3 times higher in the east than the west

Of the over 131 000 new HIV infections in the Region, 100 000 (3 out of 4) were reported across countries in the east, while 31 000 were reported in countries in the west and centre (see figure for explanations of these country groups).

3. AIDS: wide gap between east and west

New AIDS cases were over 3 times higher in the east than in the west and centre in 2012. While reported AIDS cases declined by 54% in the west, the number of people newly diagnosed with AIDS increased by 113% in the east between 2006 and 2012.

4. Significantly increased AIDS deaths in the east

Between 2006 and 2012, reported deaths among people with AIDS decreased by 14% across the Region as a whole and increased by 58% in the east only. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and WHO/Europe, the numbers of estimated deaths were as high as 91 000 in eastern Europe and central Asia and 7 600 in western and central Europe: an almost twelve-fold difference.

5. HIV still highly concentrated in key populations

The groups most affected were people who inject drugs and their sexual partners in the east, and men who have sex with men and people coming from countries with generalized HIV epidemics (where prevalence is higher than 1% in the general population) in the west.

6. Heterosexual transmission predominant in the east

Interventions to prevent and treat HIV among people who inject drugs need to continue to form the cornerstone of the response in the east. Nevertheless, heterosexual transmission has
climbed over the last few years, becoming the predominant transmission mode in most
countries in the east and currently accounting for 60% of cases.

7. Insufficient increase in HIV testing and counselling
HIV testing and counselling need to be scaled up. In 2012, 50% of newly diagnosed HIV
infections in the Region were diagnosed late (with CD4 cell counts below 350/mm³) and 30%
even later (with CD4 cell counts of 200/mm³ or lower), causing delayed initiation of
antiretroviral therapy.

8. Antiretroviral therapy still suboptimal
The rise in new HIV and AIDS cases in the east was closely linked to poor coverage of
prevention measures and antiretroviral therapy (ART). While the number of people receiving
ART increased by 45% from 2011 to 2012 (rising to almost 200 000), only about a third
(35%) of the people who needed ART were receiving it. ART coverage was much higher in
the west.

9. Need for scaled-up harm-reduction measures in the east
Access to opioid substitution therapy and needle and syringe programmes remained limited in
many countries in the east. Scaling up these essential harm-reduction measures is key to
reducing the transmission of HIV among people who inject drugs and their sexual partners.

10. Raising treatment coverage by applying new guidelines
New WHO treatment guidelines call on all countries to start treatment earlier for adults living
with HIV – with CD4 cell counts at 500 cells/mm³ or lower – as their immune systems are
still strong. WHO’s 2010 guidelines recommended offering treatment to people with cell
counts of or below 350 CD4 cells/mm³.

Implementation of the new guidelines will result in more people in the Region receiving
ART, reducing AIDS-related mortality and preventing further transmission of HIV infection.

Further information
The 53 countries in the WHO European Region are divided into three geographical areas
based on epidemiological considerations and in accordance with the division used in previous
reports on HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe dating back to the 1980s (see figure): west (23
countries), centre (15 countries) and east (15 countries). The division reflects similarities in
epidemiological dynamics, such as epidemic levels, trends over time and transmission
patterns.

LINKS

- HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe 2012
  ECDC, 2013

- Global update on HIV treatment 2013: results, impact and opportunities
  WHO headquarters, 2013

- Global report. UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic 2013
  UNAIDS, 2013

- Consolidated guidelines on the use of antiretroviral drugs for treating and preventing HIV infection. Recommendations for a public health approach
  WHO headquarters, 2013