

State of Denial: Why Japan Needs to Face Up to Its AIDS Problem

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While last month's World Aids Day provided an opportunity to take stock of what has been achieved in the fight against the disease, it was also a sobering reminder of how much more needs to be done.

Attention inevitably, and understandably, focused on ways of tackling the problem in developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet there are some worrying indications that one of the world's richest nations has failed to learn from efforts elsewhere.

At first glance, the number of cases in Japan appears relatively small, with only 12,000 reported cases of people living with HIV. However, there are fears that many thousands more people may not have reported it, or may not even have been diagnosed yet. "The numbers seem low in Japan because people are not getting tested," says Louise Haynes, AIDS educator and director of the AIDS education organization JapaNetwork. "If more people get tested, the numbers will go up exponentially."

Some estimates suggested the number of actual HIV infected people in Japan may be as high as 50,000, a figure that could grow dramatically.

This is worrying and unnecessary in a nation which has more than adequate resources to deal with the disease.

What makes Japan particularly unusual among developed countries is that it is showing an increasing number of people being diagnosed with full blown AIDS, an indicator that people are not even aware there is a problem.

'Most Japanese heterosexuals don't even imagine there's a risk of HIV. Most people are reluctant to get tested so a comparatively high rate get their status after they have AIDS,' explains Masaki Inaba, Program Coordinator on HIV/AIDS and Infectious Diseases for the Africa Japan Forum.

Condom sales are another telling sign of the lack of seriousness with which many are treating the epidemic, with sales at their lowest levels ever. Condom manufacturer Toshiaki Ishii has reported that condom production was at its highest in 1997, but by 2004 had fallen by 50 percent.

With the theme of last year's AIDS Day being 'Accountability', it is essential for a wealthy nation like Japan to consider exactly who or what is to blame for

the growing number of cases of HIV and AIDS among its population of 130 million.

'Prevention and testing are the two biggest problems here. The Japanese Government should be pushed to harmonize its approach to AIDS prevention and awareness to a global standard,' Mr. Inaba says.

The AIDS problem in Japan is particularly worrying on several levels. First and foremost is the fact that so many Japanese just are not aware they are infected, while those that are seem reluctant to come forward for treatment. This may partly be the result of its shame based society, one where open discussion or exploration of one's sex life is out of the question.

'It seems there's a tremendous stigma in Japanese society, and stigma rises to the top very quickly if you can't talk about the issue,' argues Kevin Frost, Vice President of Clinical Research and Prevention Programs at AMfAR and director of TREAT Asia.

A further complication is that Japanese have found it difficult to accept that it is a problem in Japan. Until now, many have considered the disease a foreign phenomenon.

Furthermore, AIDS education is still shockingly inadequate in Japan, with little knowledge or resources directed towards the disease.

'Teachers in school, especially in Japan where they have so many students, can't find the time to include it in their curriculum. It also surprises me that many of my university students have no knowledge of the disease. Some even think it's spread by mosquitoes,' said Ms Haynes.

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare recently released figures showing that nearly 40 percent of all Japanese newly infected with AIDS were teenagers or people in their twenties. This is particularly worrisome considering the often unsafe sexual practices amongst the young, who one survey indicated are becoming more sexually active and at a younger age.

Japan is already facing a contracting population - if current trends continue the country's population will halve in the next hundred years. The last thing it needs is an epidemic among its young people. It is therefore time for Japan to deal frankly with the problem.

As former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan wrote recently, 'it requires every one of us to help bring AIDS out of the shadows, and spread the message that silence is death.'

It is time for the nation of Japan to sit up and listen to this message.

