

Press statement

India expands monitoring of AIDS epidemic

New estimates produced from improved data collection methods give better understanding of AIDS epidemic in India

Geneva, 12 June 2007 – As part of its continuous efforts to know its epidemic better, India's National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), supported by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), is using data from the expanded surveillance system and a new population-based survey to produce more accurate estimates of the AIDS epidemic in India. The UNAIDS Secretariat and the World Health Organization (WHO) have both provided technical assistance to this new analysis.

In 1998, India initiated a nationwide HIV sentinel surveillance system in which HIV prevalence data were collected from several groups, including pregnant women, people attending sexually transmitted infection clinics, female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and people who inject drugs. The system was expanded from 155 sites in 1998 to 703 sites in 2005 and 1,164 sites in 2006.

In 2005-2006, a population-based survey was conducted in India, under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with the support of several international partners. This survey, entitled the 'National Family and Health Survey' or 'NFHS-3', was designed to provide estimates of HIV prevalence for states with particularly high HIV prevalence rates as well as estimates for the entire country.

Also in 2007, for the first time, information from the sentinel surveillance system was complemented by data from the Integrated Behavioural and Biological Assessment which was conducted on high risk groups in states with high HIV prevalence in 2005-2006.

Prevalence data from the 2006 expanded sentinel HIV surveillance system and the 2005-2006 National Family Health Survey have already been analysed separately. Both show lower levels of HIV prevalence than previously estimated. Most of this difference is due to the increased availability of data from the two systems and better coverage of areas with low prevalence.

A joint analysis of all the above data sources is currently being conducted by a team of experts convened by NACO, based on recommendations from national and international experts who met on 4-6 June in New Delhi. This analysis represents an improvement in estimation methods. The final results of the joint analysis are expected by the first week of July 2007.

The UNAIDS Secretariat and WHO have strongly supported the Indian government in implementing new and improved methodologies and welcome the new findings. The new data show that less people in India are living with HIV than was previously estimated. However, this does not lessen the need for a massive scale up of prevention programmes. The better understanding of India's epidemic will enable more focused HIV prevention and treatment strategies and more effective deployment of resources for India's AIDS response.

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