Informing the People about Diseases

by Dr. M Zakir Husain

Essential public health functions need to be revisited and redefined in the light of deeper understanding of the genesis of public health menaces including new emerging infections. This is especially true if mankind is to effectively meet the health challenges of the twenty-first century.

AVING attended a ceremonial launching L of a new book on HIV-AIDS in Bangla to promote education and awareness in Bangladesh, I am more than convinced that there is something to be said in favour of demystifying public health issues It should also be noted that and solutions to make public health a subject of popular interest. Any effort to simplify information on HIV AIDS and other public health hazards arising from infections agents is commendable. There should be many more publications in simple easy-to-read texts to ed-

established. Public health seems to have for a long time been shrouded in doubt, dissension, and thought to be beyond the grasp of the public. Public health or health of the people is not the function of only medical care to cure episodes of illness and injury. Good public health is the outcome of policies and programmes of action with a much wider scope involving the medical and health professions, but more significantly the people and the society as a whole. Public health is a function of the government as well as individuals, families and communities. It is eminently suited to decentralised operations with maximum involvement of people and communities under overall central policy direc-

ucate and inform the people at

large so that a responsible and

responsive social awareness is

There is a considerable lack of information in the public mind about the true nature and behaviour of HIV (human immuno deficiency virus and its manifestation as AIDS (acquired immuno-Deficiency syndrome) in Bangladesh. There is a false sense of security arising from the very few reported cases of HIV infection and even fewer of AIDS. But it should be noted that a very small segment of the population has actually been screened and the reported number may well be the proverbial "tip of the iceberg". The predisposing conditions of HIV infection are not particularly absent in

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Bangladesh. The extent of sexually transmitted diseases is significant, the sexual behaviour of large number of migrant and mobile population at home and abroad is an unexplored and undetermined en-

unlike what is commonly believed. HIV infection is not strictly confined to people with deviant sexual behaviour nor is it confined to the drug addicts using injections and sharing needles. The infection can pass through normal sexual intimacy from husband to wife or the other way round if one of the partners has been infected accidentally. To complicate the problem, HIV infection may remain unnoticed due to lack of symptoms for a long time — five to ten years. During this period, the infection could be transmitted to contacts without their knowledge. Then there is also a clear possibility of its spread through negligent practice of health workers such as in blood transfusion and dental practice and certain other diagnostic procedures.

Unlike the small-pox virus, the HIV was detected fairly early and diagnostic tests have reached a stage of reasonable reliability. But these advantages are offset by the fact that unlike the case of small pox, no reliable vaccine has yet been found. The virus is known to change its character quickly and thus the task of producing a reliable vaccine is rendered very difficult. But the HIV is extremely vulnerable in ordinary conditions outside the body; therefore it is not spread through ordinary human contacts. Nor is it known to be transmittable through insect bites or simple contact such as handshake.

It usually takes many years — ten to fifteen — for vaccine development to reach the stage of commercial production from the laboratory bench. There is little evidence yet that there will be a commercially available vaccine to protect the public against HIV infection any time soon. Even it becomes available at a future date for use

WAITER THERE'S

A FLY IN MY SOUP!

James Bond

MINOS LTD! RINGS A BELL- EH.

TOO RIGHT!

SHE DIED!

THAT DANCER IN CAIRO MURMURED

IT'S THE NAME

JAMES

in campaigns, it may not be affordable by many countries. Thus there is very little reason for complacency or comfort in the belief that something like a magic bullet will be in our hands anytime soon. Therefore for all practical purpose education and information on how to

prevent infection remains the

only realistic option as of now. It should be very clear by now that the current awareness efforts are vague, oblique, and do not give factual knowledge as it should. Mere threats of a "killer disease" will cause more fear and concealment just as stigma and social ostracisation attached to sexually transmitted disease will prove futile in prevention and control.

And this brings me to the generally prevalent mystic around public health. Popular knowledge of public health is still rather limited. It is usually perceived as something better left only to the professional specialist. Without minimising the very important role of the professional health personnel, it is extremely important for the people to participate in the work for the protection of their health and prevent illnesses. People have the right and responsibility to fully and effectively take part in public health work. Public health literacy and awareness of the people are essential pre-conditions to let that happen.

The general improvement of nutrition, sanitation and education and standard of living during the early part of the century improved the health status of people in most of the world. Later, the discovery of antibiotics and other breakthroughs in medical technology, the control and near elimination of some of the diseases notably eradication of small pox gave rise to a sense of victory. Public health efforts and surveillance in many countries were reduced. Resources for public health programmes providing essential services and research have often been diverted to other priorities leading to weakening of public health control measures and capacities in both rich and poor countries. On the other hand, rapid international travel by millions of persons, the deforestation and new human habitats bringing people in contact with hitherto remote infectious agents, the rapidly expanding and overcrowded mega-cities with very poor environmental hygiene, changes in food production, processing and marketing of food have created enormous pressure on understaffed and

under funded public health ser-

vices. During the past two decades as many as 30 new infectious diseases have emerged which are not fully understood

The discovery of antibiotics in the decade of the fifties and the new frontiers of science and technology have generated a degree of confidence in the minds of the people that assumes that for every problem there will be a timely solution. Time is however proving that this confidence is misplaced; there are limits to what science and technology can deliver when humans behave recklessly and irresponsibly; exploit and encroach upon nature's resources and environment unremittingly, and disrupts and destroys the ecological balance with impunity. When science does not live up to our misplaced trust upon it, it shows the way clearly to the human behavioural alternatives to technology. This is eminently the case in public health. The new emerging infections that are ill understood and explained let alone cured, the reemergence of infections once under control, the deterioration of public health efforts and institutions due to resource constraints are all symptoms of human failure. Much of this failure emanates from lack of

popular understanding and acceptance of responsible behaviour and life style, respect for environment and ecology, restraint on profligate consumption in the name of progress and development.

Essential public health functions need to be revisited and redefined in the light of deeper understanding of the genesis of public health menaces including new emerging infections. This is especially true if mankind is to effectively meet the health challenges of the twenty-first century. Essential public health functions will demand a very high level of popular participation among other changes in the way services are planned and delivered. Popular participation and acceptance of responsibility by individuals, families and communities will at the minimum require demystification of public health itself to a degree that permits people to take charge along with the professionals, technicians and other functionaries of the civil society. There is no alternative to a rational division of labour between science and technology and the society in the planning and delivery of essential public health functions of the coming century. It is clear that society's reliance on science and technology to deliver cures and prevention must be realistic.

It is absolutely imperative that the subject is freed from the shackles of existing inhibitions and taboos and discussed openly and understood rationally. There is no lack of valid, useful and practical information. What is lacking is the willingness and ability to disseminate valid information on how the infection is transmitted and the behavioural alternatives to the risk of infection widely, openly, and objectively to induce rational response from the public. Trust the people to act in self-interest if given the truth directly and effectively. We need to demystify and clear the cobwebs surrounding the subject of HIV in particular and Public Health in general.

The world become a "village" where people are being brought into closer contacts every day; there is no island of security from spread of infections with rapid international travel across continents. It would be dangerous therefore to take comfort either from low reported cases of HIV infection or to assume that our life style gives us solid immunity in Bangladesh. Any overt prejudice or stigma attached to infected persons will be counterproductive and definitely harmful as it will encourage concealment. Existing constraints in demystifying public health practice and dissemina-tion of information to dispel fear and prejudice and encourage prevention and control through responsible sexual beblown AIDS it is imperative to take a long-term perspective. The adolescent population should receive sound and factual information now and not at a future time when it might be too late. The migrant workers inside the country and abroad, the health workers who come in contact with body fluids and the injecting drug users who share needles, as well as, the commercial sex workers must be enabled and helped to adopt safe sexual behaviour and to take other preventive measures. The facilities for early

detection and treatment of sex-

ually transmitted diseases must

be strengthened and the access

to them unrestricted. Safe sex

practice should become the

known and accepted norm and

no effort should be spared to fa-

Given the long latent period

of HIV infection to turn into full

haviour must be removed.

cilitate its practice. There is a public health threat looming and this is not merely confined to one or the other emerging new and less understood infection. There is a lesson already clear that it will take more than technological interventions for much of the emerging dangers are emanating from the individual and collective behaviour of the human society and the institutions of

The writer, an international health consultant, is former Director of Programme Management at WHO South East Aisa Regional Office in New

development.

Trees Given Sacred Cloaks to Fend off Loggers

roup of saffron-robed monks lead a 10-kilometre march along a dusty road into the mountains. Following them are government officers in khaki uniforms and a procession of pick-up trucks full of passengers.

An altar is set up on the lower slopes in a forest that is

Environmental activists fighting to protect threatened forests are sometimes referred to as "tree-huggers", after the Indian women who adopted the tactic in the Himalayas. In Thailand, reports Gemini News Service, Buddhist nature-lovers are going one better — ordaining the woods and dressing them in saffron robes. Ratchada Chitrada writes from Chiang Rai, Thailand

SO, HE WANTS

MORE SOUP.

threatened by illegal logging. of the Buddha, two gold-On top of the altar are an image coloured metal trays bearing candles and joss sticks, a bowl

By Hanna-Barbera

Thailand's King and Queen. In the ensuring tree-ordination ceremony, hundreds of people of all ages gather in a circle, each holding a saffron robe and a white thread that links them all together. The sound of monks chanting in Pali - the ancient language of many Buddhist scriptures - reverberates through the trees.

of flowers and a portrait of

The participants then venture into the forest, tying the sacred robes to the trees. Local people believe that anyone who dares cut a robed tree will be

An area of 225,000 trees over about 240 hectares has been targeted in the Pan district of Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. There are enough people to garland only 2,000 trees, but the heads of nearby villages take responsibility for ensuring that the exercise will continue under the authority of the local forestry officer.

Such ceremonies are being organised as part of a religious tree-protection movement that is spreading across Thailand from the north. A Buddhist philosopher, Sulak Sivalaksa, says the aim is to persuade people to respect nature again.

In the past, people would not cut trees, he explains. "If they wanted a tree for their own home, they would have to ask permission from the spirit of the trees. Unfortunately, mod-



ern education has killed that sort of belief. That's why we are bringing back the custom, to make people feel trees have a spirit, just as we do, and that by ordaining the tree they will become like a monk, a novice. It works - for most people it

Respect for the environment is an important part of Buddhism, which has been established in Thailand for more than 700 years and is the core of Thai culture and society. More than 90 per cent of Thais are

Buddhists. "The Buddha was born under

a tree, found enlightenment under a tree, preached his first sermon under a tree, spent most of his time in the forests, in the parks and in the groves, and, of course, he passed away under two trees, surrounded by followers," says Sulak. "So, obviously, the forest, the trees, the environment, natural surroundings are part and parcel of

Greenland and

the Antarctic

Thewin Akarasilakun, an ecologist and head of the Community and Ecology Development Association in northern Thailand, says: "Every tree is like a monk and is a represen-

tative of Lord Buddha in protecting the forests. If anyone cuts a tree, it's like killing a monk. Villagers believe that if they come to ordain a tree it is the same as ordaining a monk." He says that since the

scheme started in June 1996. "we see that villager's awareness has increased. An increasing number are joining in".

Activists connected with the movement say that about 50 million trees covering 160,000 hectares have been ordained.

The need for protection is pressing. Although official figures show that logging has decreased considerably since 1985, Thailand's forest cover has shrunk during the period from 29 per cent to less than 26 per cent, according to official figures. Some academics and non-government organisations put the forested area at only 15 e latest Tallibandrage

... Despite the enthusiasm of the movement's proponents, the government's environment department is cautious about its impact. The department cooperates with the project, but an official said it had not yet properly assessed its effectiveness and there was no concrete evidence that the ordination programme actually reduced log-

The government's own plans for forest protection include the creation of "community forests", in which villagers are given responsibility for a wooded area in their locality. They can enter the forest to collect dead wood, mushrooms, berries, hers and other forest products. In return, they are expected to assist government officials in ensuring that no logging or destructive activity takes place in the forest.

The writer is a Bangkokbased freelance journalist.

Belgian envoy calls on PM

The Belgian Ambassador to Bangladesh, Cristina Funes-Noppen, called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office yesterday, reports UNB.

Funes-Noppen, based in Thailand and concurrently accredited to Bangladesh, held a discussion with the Prime Minister on bilateral issues for strengthening mutual cooperation in different fields.

Parliamentary team meets Australian Speaker

The Bangladesh parliamentary delegation, led by Adviser to the Prime Minister on Parliamentary Affairs Suranjit Sengupta, MP, now on a visit to Australia, was given a warm welcome yesterday by the Speaker of the House of Representative Bob Halberson, OBE, MP at his office, according to a message received in the city from Canberra yesterday, reports BSS.

The leader of Bangladesh delegation briefly explained to the Australian Speaker the reformative measures being carried out in Bangladesh parlia-

The delegation also had a meeting with Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer and discussed mat-

ters of mutual interest. President, PM greet Iranian President

President Justice Sha habuddin Ahmed vesterday extended his heartfelt felicitations to Hojjatoleslam Syed Mohammad Khatami on his victory in the Iranian presidential election, reports BSS. In a separate message Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday congratulated Hojjatoleslam Syed Mohammad Khatami on the same occasion.



procession demanding announcement of the 5th Wage Board Award in the city yesterday. -Star photo

Uttam Kumar Das wins 'Noorjahan Memorial Award '96'

Uttam Kumar Das of The Financial Express has been adjudged as the recipient of the Noorjahan Memorial Award for Journalism" for the year 1996, reports BSS.

The award, introduced by the Delta Life Insurance Company. is an effort to encourage improvement in the quality of reporting in the daily newspapers and periodicals, to mobilise public opinion against repression of women and denial of their fundamental rights

A panel of judges chose Das for the award for his report captioned "Poverty blazes trail for traffickers," published on January 12, this year in the English-language daily

The award will be presented at a function, at the Jatiya Press Club auditorium at 5 pm today. Dr Sufia Ahmed, National Professor, will be the chief guest.

BRAC official missing

An official of the head office of BRAC has been missing since Sunday morning, reports UNB. BRAC officials said stranger came to Mamun-ur-Rashid, a

data management assistant of BRAC research and evaluation department, and called him out of his office at about 11:30 am on Sunday. Later, a lunch box and Tk 3,000 were found in the bag of

Mamun in his room on the 15th floor of the BRAC head office at Mohakhali in the city. Mamun resides at Ka 171/1 Khilkhet (Uttar Para), Dhaka, Cantonment

Shaheed Suhrawardy College test June 5

Degree test for second year BSc. BA, and BCom students of Govt Shaheed Suhrawardy College begins on June 5 at 2 pm. reports UNB.

The timetable for the test has been hung on the college notice board, says a press release.

12 pc budgetary allocation for farm labourers urged

ple interest.

Metropolitan

The Bangladesh Khetmojur Union yesterday demanded 12 per cent allocation for the farm labourers in the national budget to create employment oppor tunities for them and resolving their other problems, reports

DRAWN BY JOHN MCLUSK

I SUSPECT

FROM THE CITY MAY BE MORE TO THE POINT THAN GREEK

MYTHOLOGY

OT TO MENTION THE CLD GREEK KING MINOS, WHOSE WIFE SPAWNED THE MINOTAUR.

It announced action programmes including sit-in demonstration in front of the Secretariat from 11 am on June 23 to press the government to realise its 6-point demand.

The Union will also submit a memorandum to the Speaker of Parliament and all the 330 members on the day. In support of its June 23 pro-

gramme, the union will organise demonstration and sit-in at thana level on June 14. Announcing the programme

at a press conference the leaders of the Union also demanded allocation in the budget on a separate head for the agricultural workers who make up 59 per cent of total workforce in the country. They said although the gov-

ernment had announced subsidy of Tk 100 crore in agriculture sector, the agricultural labourers were not getting any benefit out of it. "The agri-labourers have no

access to banks," said a statement read out by General Secretary of the Union Saiful Huq. Other demands of the Union

include constitutional guarantee to work round the year for them, fixing daily wage equal to market price of 6 kg rice, recognition as rural labourers, implementation of farm labour law by officially enrolling

It also demanded right of the landless people to government khas and ceiling-surplus land increase in subsidy on agriculture and rural sector and priceprotection to agricultural products and also bank loan without

collateral and at 5 per cent sim-

The press conference was held at the Topkhana office of the Union where Union President Bimal Biswas and central members Zakir Hossain Raju, Prof Abdus Sattar, Nasimuddin, Amrita Barua and Anwar Hossain were present.

Call to update legal edn

Chairman of the Legal Education Committee of Bangla desh Bar Council M Amir-ul-Islam yesterday said proficiency both in English and Bengali should be given top priority in law education, reports

He said language is the vehi cle of law which is now weak among the lawyers in the coun-

Islam, who is also the chairman of Legal Education and Training Institute, was speaking as the chief guest at the concluding function of a month-long training course for law teachers.

Islam suggested updating legal education to face the challenges of the modern age and protect the interest of the peo-

The National University in cooperation with the Supreme Court Legal Education and Training Institute organised the training course. Twentyfour law teachers from different colleges participated.

Presided over by Justice Habibur Rahman, the function was also addressed by honorary treasurer of the National University Syed Ahmed Hossain and course coordinator Prof Dr M Mobarak Ali Akhand.



our life.

Students of Scholastica School performing in a production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream at the National Museum auditorium in the city yesterday.

HERE and THERE

AATA

A four-day orientation course on "Law in Office Management" was inaugurated by M Hafijuddin Khan, Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh, at the Audit and Accounts Training Academy (AATA) yesterday, says a press release.

K S Nabi, Attorney General of Bangladesh, was the special guest, while Asif Ali, Director General of AATA, presided.

The Association for Social

Advancement (ASA) started a Tk 3.25 crore rehabilitation programme on Saturday for the cyclone victim members of the organisation in 10 thanas un der Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts. This rehabilitation assistance will be extended to 13 thousand cyclone-affected families, says a press release.

JICA Alumni Association

The election of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Alumni Association, Bangladesh, was held recently. Dr Matiur Rahman and Md Azmal Chawdhury were elected as president and general secretary respectively.

The newly elected other office-bearers of the association are: Azizul Hoque and AKM Nurul Alam, vice president, Md Sirajul Kabir and Khandakar Abdul Mannan, joint secretary, AKM Mahbubul Hossain, treasurer, Md Abdul Malek, organising secretary. Khaleda Fahmi, cultural secretary, Dr Md Saleh Ahmed, publicity secretary, Shireen Sultana, games secretary and other members are: Md Ekramul Huq. Zulfiker Ahmed, Emdadul Huq, Syeda Sultana Rezia Begum.

Motia in cyclone-hit areas

Steps taken for agricultural rehabilitation

The government has undertaken initiatives for agricultural rehabilitation side by side providing compensation and ensuring other rehabilitation for the cyclone-affected people of the coastal districts, reports

Minister for Agriculture and Food Begum Motia Choudhury said this while distributing relief money among the affected people in Chhanua union under Banshkhali thana of Chittagong district yesterday.

The minister said the government has undertaken a comprehensive programme within the annual development programme (ADP) for the compensation and rehabilitation of the distressed people.

More donations to PM's relief fund

Members of the Bangladesh Armed Forces, including civilian employees, donated their one day's salary to the Prime Minister's relief fund, an ISPR press release said, reports BSS.

Chief of Army Staff Lt Gen Muhammad Mahbubur Rahman handed over a cheque for Tk 68 lakh to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her Tejgaon office on behalf of the army yesterday. Chief of the Naval Staff Rear ·Admiral Mohammad Nurul Islam and Chief of the Air Staff Air Vice-Marshal Jamal Uddin

Ahmed also handed over a cheque for Tk 8 lakh 50 thousand each to the fund on behalf of their respective services. Officers and employees of

the Cabinet division donated their one day's salary to the relief fund.