

DRUG users using needles, however, are the most susceptible group. Not only can they contract the HIV virus through sharing needles, these individuals often go to sex workers which increase the risk of the virus spreading. The latest data available from the sero-surveillance report shows that about four per cent of the IDUs have HIV infection and it is set to increase or may even reach epidemic proportion among them, experts point out.

Initially, the rate of infection among the IDUs in central Bangladesh was 1.7 per cent which has now jumped to four per cent and reaching close to the 'concentrated epidemic' mark of five percent among the IDUs.

Major General A S M Motiur Rahman speaking to the Star Weekend Magazine says, "Bangladesh is still lucky to be low prevalence with high risk behaviour. In other high risk groups like commercial sex workers, truckers and professional blood donors the prevalence of HIV infection is less than one per cent."

Maj. General Rahman, who is the Chairman of the National AIDS Technical Committee, however, said that considering the high risk behaviour there is no reason to believe that the country is safe from an outburst of HIV infection.

Surveys of commercial sex workers also shows that although these women have every intention of using condom and understand the risk of not protecting themselves, in most cases it was found that their clients refused to use condoms.

Rehana, (not real name) a sex worker from a city suburb says, "Most of my clients do not enjoy sex with a condom. Since they are buying sex it is they who rule the business 'either forget condom or forget the sex' my clients say."

Although they need to be counseled before sex, the majority of the CSWs do



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Adolescents have little awareness about the ways in which HIV/AIDS can be contracted.

LOW PREVALENCE

According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the first cases of HIV/AIDS, detected in Bangladesh was the late 1980s and early 1990s, were among citizens returning from foreign travel.

The same UN agency reported, 13,000 people in Bangladesh were living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2001. Between 1989 and 1996, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control, and Research (IEDCR) tested 70,676 people from a variety of occupational groups and found only 82 to be infected. Out of the total 67 were males, many who had lived abroad, and 15 females.

By June 2002, the cumulative total of passively reported HIV cases was 216, according to the Department of Virology of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMUH).

The information on HIV prevalence in Bangladesh is limited and available data suggests that the overall prevalence is low even among vulnerable groups.

In view of the gradual infection rate that started in the early 80s, the Bangladesh government formed a National AIDS Committee way back in October 1985 for prevention and control of HIV/AIDS. By 2003 it has completed a Short term Plan of Action, an interim plan of Action and many other activities related to prevention and control of HIV/AIDS.

The National AIDS Committee, therefore, considered the necessity for a national policy on HIV/AIDS. The Director General of Health Services, accordingly, formed an 11-member "Task Force" with the chairman of the Technical Committee as its convenor.



PHOTO: ZAHEDULI KHAN

Selling sex is the only way she can live but often it is a sentence to premature death.