

Drug use and HIV vulnerability

Quest for a holistic national response

DR. SYED KAMALUDDIN AHMED

INJECTING drug use is one of the major routes of spread for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and in many places HIV/AIDS epidemic along with other two inevitable consequences of injecting drug use like hepatitis B and C is spreading with an astonishing speed causing massive loss of life and consequent impact on development. Treatment, population data and also street sample findings suggest that, like many west European countries and those of Russian Federation, injecting drug use is on the rise in our country specially after street availability of buprenorphine, a synthetic opiate preparation. Bangladesh is described as a 'low prevalence but high risk' situation both for drug abuse and HIV spread. Risk is always determined principally by the presence of vulnerability ingredients and aggravating factors. Research findings suggest that "injecting drug use increases the vulnerability of HIV spread" and "its uninterrupted rise aggravates the existing situation". Therefore, time has arrived to look into the relationship between these two important public health and development issues with eyes of concern.

HIV/AIDS epidemic and its existing situation in Bangladesh is not very well understood, but it is true that HIV is being detected among our population especially among vulnerable cohorts. Repeated rounds of surveillance revealed that the rate of seropositivity is highest among injecting drug users (IDUs) and the findings also confirmed the presence of high level of behavioural risk factors for the acquisition of HIV infection. The behaviour having highest risk among drug abusing population is sharing of needles. When the sentinel surveillances showed the above findings, a number of studies on knowledge, attitude, behaviour and practice (KABP) showed that there is a very low knowledge on HIV/AIDS among different population groups especially about the relationship between drug use and transmission of HIV.

There are other reasons for drug abusing population to remain a potential source of HIV transmission. Institute based information reveals a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among drug abusing population, and sexual promiscuity is quite common among them. Many IDUs are married, and practice of unsafe sex increases the risk of heterosexual transmission among married couple and thereby increases the vulnerability of mother to child transmission at the same time. It has been found that drug abuse including injecting drug use is reasonably prevalent among low-fee sex workers. The

prevalence is also high among professional blood donors, another high-risk population for HIV transmission. There is attitudinal commonality among the drug abusing population and population vulnerable to HIV infection.

As mentioned earlier and as of time today, the level of HIV in this country has been low and appears to have been increased quite slowly over the past few years. At this moment, it is little difficult to predict how much more and how rapidly such an increase would take place. Only continuous and repeated surveillance will be able to provide us the right kind of information and it may only be assumed that Bangladesh is in the pre-epidemic stage for HIV. If an epidemic erupts, it will presumably erupt first among low-fee sex workers with the highest average turnover of customers, and injecting drug users. The low-

into an impending and escalating epidemic with serious health and socio-economic consequences. If so happens, there would be necessity for major adjustments within individuals and their families, the health system, the community and the society as a whole. Otherwise one may apprehend an overburdened health care system both in terms of human and financial resources, disintegration of family structures, problems relating to increased poverty, increased number of orphans and abandoned children, and shortage of manpower in agriculture, industry and other sectors. It may thus be said that it is time for an immediate action. We cannot miss this window of opportunities for a preventive action. Therefore, the country needs to take prompt initiatives and reinforce existing responses to prevent these two inseparable problems. This may be accomplished by adopt-

ing and/or adjusting time bound national policies, developing a long-term strategy, initiating multi-sectoral programme implementation, increasing partnership with NGOs and other community organisations, developing regular surveillance system, prioritising targeted intervention, ensuring participation of vulnerable and affected population in preventive action, initiating safe behavioural practice campaign, attracting donor support and resource mobilisation, and making some major breakthrough in the field of information dissemination.

It may be said that there are many potential areas for success in national response for drug abuse control and HIV/AIDS prevention. Considering the nature and uniqueness of the problems and their preponderance to spread among the high-risk behaviour practicing population, population specific comprehensive and holistic intervention programmes are needed. Capacity building, motivational activities, and availability and accessibility to high quality client friendly services would increase the possibility of sustenance of the programmes.

fee brothel based sex workers have the possibility of getting infected by male partners who regularly frequent towns and ports along the Bangladesh border with high prevalent countries. Injecting drug use is also more prevalent in the areas having common border with neighbouring countries. Some of the bordering areas of India like Manipur have a very high rate of HIV infection among drug injectors.

Many special contextual features including widespread poverty, unequal access to health services, often-subordinate status of women, and low literacy and education contribute equally and simultaneously to the propagation of both these two epidemics. In addition, there is a visible dearth of a multi-sectoral response, and policy level support and commitment for empowerment of vulnerable groups to negotiate on the issues like stigma and discrimination. Moreover, research, especially operational research, which is essential for effective implementation of any programme particularly those related to preventive actions in the field of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS is very limited in this country.

The above mentioned factors indicate that the present drug abuse and HIV situation could evolve rapidly

work plans. The strategy in its projection should identify the need for resource allocation and provide systematic guideline for resource distribution. It should have specific scheme for mobilizing resources to support various government, private and non-government sector initiatives.

The broad strategy in its development should take into consideration the present epidemiological situation and the likely future scenario. The priority strategies, therefore, should primarily include provisions for interventions targeted at vulnerable and high-risk population, increased availability and accessibility of services, and creation of an enabling environment for people in general and for those afflicted by the problems in particular. The latter should also include enactment of legislation to counter discrimination against drug abusing population, people living with HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable groups, and initiatives towards improving community acceptance.

The policy should also have scope for augmenting existing surveillance systems to determine present and future magnitude of the problem.

One of the comprehensive policy is adopted and a strategy is developed, what is needed is a holistic National Intervention Plan and an integrated plan of action with wider participation of different stakeholders. The work plan should include, among others, scheduled plan of activities, expected output with situation specific assumptions, and activity specific estimated budget. In case of intervention programmes for marginalised and hard to reach population, the programmes need more frequent review for taking stock of the programme accomplishments, and identify gaps and necessities. It would also aid in redesigning the whole programme or a part of it specially because both drug abuse and HIV/AIDS are ever changing phenomena taking different dimensions at different times. Another mandatory element in programme implementation is integrated team building exercise involving all management, technical and support services. There is also a considerable need for capacity building specifically for NGOs both in programme implementation and programme management. It is all the more necessary because motivation and skill are two very important components for implementation of any programme and drug abuse and HIV/AIDS together have certain uniqueness in their profile as a problem and needs necessary motivation and skill to work for them.

Review of programme implementation strategies in different countries, both developing and developed, reveals certain issues that may need priority consideration. In order to implement interventions in specific population, especially in a low prevalent situation, targeted intervention is the method of choice for effective

Dirty deeds of Bush minorities

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

THE Bush administration is making history in hiring minorities to perform high-profile jobs. Colin Powell was the first black man to head the State Department, Condoleezza Rice the first black woman to be the

National Security Advisor and now Secretary of State. Alberto Gonzales, if confirmed by the Senate, would be the first Hispanic to be crowned as the United States Attorney General. The induction of these and other minorities into what has been a game of white monopoly is bewitching in that it tells the world that President Bush values both equality and diversity and that racial prejudices, actively wired in American power grids, are falling apart. No longer are Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians confined to dirty jobs, such as cleaning private quarters of the white establishment. Says the administration, how sons and daughters of the people of colour are being actively recruited for leading the world. Cynicism aside, however, the thanksgiving dinner for this great achievement is infested with flies. The willing coalition of black, brown, and other faces of colour appears to have been summoned to whitewash foreign invasions, occupations, deportations, detentions, disappearances, and even commission of war crimes such as torture and extra-judicial executions. Minorities are cast as big-headed puppets to speak daggers on behalf of a producer/director who, we are told, believes in God, democracy, and liberation.

Take Dr. Condoleezza Rice, known as Condi (which means sweet). Born in the same year the famous Brown v. Board of Education case outlawing segregation was decided, raised in the Deep South where lynching of the innocent had been the way to vent hatred, and scarred with memories of her schoolmate killed in the bombing of a black church by white supremacists, Condi has come a long way indeed to champion abusive harshness against the enemy. Of all the president's men and women, Condi, a pastor's daughter, has been the most combative in her rhetoric of warfare. It was Condi, the brilliant professor on the Bush cabinet, who wrote a column in the New York Times to tell the world "Why we know Iraq is lying" about weapons of mass destruction, concluding her piece with the ominous words "time is running out." The time did run out on Iraq, UN inspectors, and the world calling for restraint, though Condi knew little about the truth of her crusade. One wonders how Condi would employ her militaristic strategies in her new role as America's chief diplomat. Another Bush minority, Alberto Gonzalez, has

gathered equally impressive credentials to promote abusive harshness at home and abroad. Rising from a humble Mexican family in Texas, going to college against all odds of a working class household, and graduating from Harvard Law School, Alberto has endeared himself to the administration's tough guys. As the White House Counsel, Alberto envisioned a lawless prison for the so-called enemy combatants captured in Afghanistan. He denied them the protection of Geneva Conventions, arguing that some of the law's provisions are obsolete. In 2002, Alberto cleared a legal memo allowing torture as an acceptable means to investigate enemy combatants unless torture results in "death, organ failure, or serious impairment of bodily functions." Discarding restraints of international law, since the tough guys had no use for them, Alberto's memos most certainly contributed to abominable abuses at Abu Ghariab (which perchance was under the general command of General Ricardo Sanchez, another Bush minority supervising the slaughter of Iraqi civilians). Seeing law as an instrument of power, Alberto has constructed a notion of White House legality with no intrinsic morality. It remains to be seen how Alberto, if confirmed by the Senate, would lead the Department of Justice whose job is not simply to please the White House but to enforce laws and protect civil liberties.

The story of Viet Dinh, perhaps the most brilliant Bush minority, is no less compelling. Born in Saigon when bombs were falling all over Vietnam, Viet entered America as a refugee. Graduating magna cum laude from Harvard Law School, a clerk with Supreme Court Justice Sandra O'Connor, and later teaching at the Georgetown Law Center, Viet was ripe

in 2001 to serve the public. As the Irony would have it, the glory of authoring the Patriot Act fell on this Asian refugee. The Act he authored is an inscrutable text, neither elegant nor candid, but one hammered together to sneak and peek, gag, detain, and even criminally implicate speech protected under the First Amendment. In his media encounters, Viet defends the Act as a wonderful security gift to Americans (Muslim Americans excluded), and labels the grassroots movement against the Act as "hysteria and futility signifying nothing."

Far more pompous than Condi, Alberto, and Viet is Colin Powell who has served his boss with shrewd skepticism instead of foolish fervour. Colin is gaining the reputation of a man of conscience who has resisted being totally subservient to the tough guys. That is why, the argument goes, he first lost his power, then his job. That might be so. But it was this Bush minority who deceived the Security Council about pictures of Iraqi trucks hauling the weapons of mass destruction. Colin seemingly disapproved the war but nonetheless continued to support it for years. This is no conscience. In any event, Colin has aided and abetted a dirty foreign policy far too long to claim any purity.

Thus a chapter is being written in American history, the theme of which is dirty diversity. Non-white faces have been hired for big-ticket jobs so that a black man vouches for an unjust war, a black man defends it, a Hispanic supervises the slaughter of civilians while another justifies the use of torture, and a Vietnamese refugee writes the law to maim civil liberties in America.

Dr. Khan is a professor of law at Washburn University School of Law in Topeka, Kansas.

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(Mohammed Shamsul Alam)
Advocate
Supreme Court of Bangladesh
Room No. 97 (old) 305 (new), (2 Floor)
Supreme Court Bar Bhaban, Dhaka

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