

Unwind the red ribbon



"... millions of young people know too little about HIV to protect themselves."

Red ribbon – the red alert

An Indian girl, daughter of a traditional rural family, having low level of education got married to a person working in different state. Marriage got fixed by the local priest, the janampatri (the astrological assessments of life) of both bride and bridegroom were verified, matched and it was astrologically supposed to be a happy marriage. But, after few months, the girl felt ill, blood test discovered she is a victim of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), infected by her husband who was infected by the same. This is not a story of single girl, such girls are in thousands around us, in the rural areas of developing countries, HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) detection or detection of AIDS is still considered to be a 'curse'. But is it? Neither any disease should be treated as a curse, nor the victims of it, the curse lies in our social system where knowledge sharing lacks, social traditions and blind customs overpower the scientific truth; so astrological assessments matter more in matrimonial alliances rather than medical tests! Therefore the symptoms and diseases like Thalassaemia, HIV/AIDS are carried on from one generation to another.

The red ribbon, an international symbol of AIDS awareness, is a knot to all the nations now. AIDS was first reported in the United States in 1981 and has now become a major worldwide epidemic. Since 1981, more than 25 million people have died of AIDS. Around half of all people who become infected with HIV do so before they are 25 and are killed by AIDS before they are 35.

Share knowledge to save others

In The Millennium Development Goals Report 2005, the following lines are mentioned which are most important: "Because there is no cure for AIDS, prevention is essential. But millions of young people know too little about HIV to protect themselves". In the same report, it has been mentioned that surveys in sub-Saharan Africa have revealed that only 21 per cent of young women and 30 per cent of young

men know the basics about how to avoid infection and surveys of young women in South-Eastern Asia show even lower levels of knowledge.

In this information age, when we talk about 'knowledge sharing', we ourselves sometimes create the 'knowledge divide'. The people who know about the causes and effects of HIV/AIDS, ignore own social responsibility to enlighten the others. A person living with HIV, who is medically known as an HIV positive person, is one who has virus in his/her body. Such a person might appear to be perfectly normal and healthy and asymptomatic for many years. It must be revealed to all that an asymptomatic HIV infected person does not have AIDS. But when an HIV positive person's T lymphocytes, s/he starts developing symptoms. Therefore, the most important aspect which needs to be emphasised and communicated more among the common people is that all persons with AIDS are infected with HIV, but not all persons with HIV infection have AIDS.

When statistics threatens

Around 95% of people with HIV/AIDS live in developing nations. The UNAIDS/WHO report has been launched in 19 cities worldwide on 21st November 2005. According to new UNAIDS/WHO report, there is new evidence that adult HIV infection rates have decreased in certain countries and that changes in behaviour to prevent infection have played a key part in these declines. Kenya, Zimbabwe and some countries in the Caribbean region show declines in HIV prevalence over the past few years with overall adult infection rates decreasing in Kenya and there is evidence of drops in HIV rates among pregnant women in Zimbabwe. Despite decreases in the rate of infection in certain countries, the overall number of people living with HIV has continued to increase in all regions of the world except the Caribbean. Overall trends in HIV transmission are still increasing, there were an additional five million new infections in 2005. So, far

Years	Adults and children living with HIV	Number of women living with HIV	Adults and children newly infected with HIV	Adult prevalence (%)	Adult and child death due to Aids
2005	8.3 million [5.4–12.0 million]	2.0 million [1.3–3.0 million]	1.1 million [600 000–2.5 million]	0.4 [0.3–0.6]	520000 [330 000–780 000]

greater HIV prevention efforts are needed to slow the epidemic.

Aiding AIDS on each day

The most threatening fact is that the people with AIDS are surviving longer and are contributing to a steady increase in the number of people living with AIDS. This trend will continue as long as the number of new diagnoses exceeds the number of people dying each year. Out of 6.5 million people in developing and transitional countries who need life-saving AIDS drugs, only 1 million are receiving them.

World AIDS Day, celebrated since 1988, is important in reminding people that HIV has not gone away, and that there are many things still to be done. For many years, World AIDS Day has been organised by UNAIDS, who have chosen the theme after consultation with other organisations. In 2005, UNAIDS handed over responsibility for World AIDS Day to an independent organisation known as The World AIDS Campaign (WAC). The WAC's theme for their campaign is 'Stop AIDS: Keep the Promise'. This theme is however not specific to World AIDS Day alone but to the work the WAC does throughout the year. It will also remain the focus until 2010. This change in the way that World AIDS Day is organised has caused some confusion among HIV and AIDS organisations.

Whatever one decides to do for World AIDS Day however, the fact remains that one should follow its basic principles by raising awareness and understanding where s/he lives and by remembering the millions living with HIV or suffering because of AIDS. The new UNAIDS/WHO report recognises that access to HIV treatment has

improved markedly over the past two years. More than one million people in low-and middle-income countries are now living longer and having better lives because they are on antiretroviral treatment and an estimated 250,000 to 350,000 deaths were averted this year because of expanded access to HIV treatment. The report notes that, without HIV prevention measures, about 35% of children born to HIVpositive women will contract the virus. While mother-to-child transmission has been virtually eliminated from industrialised countries and service coverage is improving in many other places, it still falls far short in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite the efforts made by the international and national organisations, governments, media and private initiatives, there are still numerous myths and blind beliefs regarding the HIV/AIDS which mostly affect the people having less education and social enlightenment. Levels of knowledge of safe sex and HIV remain low in many countries, even in countries with high and growing prevalence. In 24 sub-Saharan countries, two-thirds or more of young women lacked comprehensive knowledge of HIV transmission. Strong HIV surveillance with proper knowledge dissemination by right persons in the most suitable manner is the need of the hour. Let's try to untie the red knot from the nations whichever we belong to and promise to coming generations to give them a knot-free world. Following the target of MDG 6, it is high time to join hands to 'halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS'. ■

*The complete article with references can be read at www.i4d.csdm.in
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