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SPECIAL PROGRAMME ON AIDS STATEMENT  
CRITERIA FOR SCREENING PROGRAMMES FOR  
HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV)

Screening for infection or disease has been a useful activity in a variety of public health programmes. However, screening programmes must be carefully considered and well-designed in order to contribute effectively to public health goals.

Programmes of screening for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection have been proposed in various countries. For example, in many countries, screening of blood donors has been successfully implemented. However, the purpose and objectives of some HIV screening programmes may not have been clearly defined and the complex logistic, technical, economic, legal, ethical and social aspects of such programmes may not have been addressed and resolved. Inadequately designed HIV screening programmes may be intrusive, may even threaten fundamental human rights, and are very likely to be both expensive and ineffective. Further, such programmes may have a negative effect on AIDS prevention and control by diverting human, material and financial resources away from education programmes and other vital HIV prevention activities.

In order to help ensure that these issues are systematically addressed whenever HIV screening programmes are considered, the WHO Special Programme on AIDS convened a Meeting on 'Criteria for HIV-Screening Programmes' in Geneva on 20-21 May 1987. Twenty-one participants from 17 countries attended the meeting, including epidemiologists, virologists, experts in legal medicine and ethics, social and behavioural scientists and disease control specialists.

At the meeting, a comprehensive list of criteria was developed, which should be explicitly addressed in the planning of any HIV screening programme. By adhering to these criteria, successful and effective public health results from any screening programmes can best be ensured. The interests of both public health and respect for human rights will best be served by addressing all of these criteria with care prior to initiation of screening programmes which are an element in HIV prevention and control strategies. Conversely, any HIV screening programme which fails to address these criteria must be considered to be inadequate.

These criteria include over 50 distinct issues which are grouped under nine headings:

1. What is the rationale of the proposed programme?
2. What population is to be screened? (e.g., how will persons in the target population be identified for screening?; if testing is obligatory, what sanctions would apply if persons fail to comply?; what is the plan for periodic retesting of the population screened?)

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3. What test method is to be used? (e.g., problem of false-positive test results, technical aspects and limitations of test; technical skill and training required by technicians; storage characteristics and stability of reagents; interpretation characteristics of the test.)
4. Where is the laboratory testing to be done? (e.g., are quality control systems adequate for tests and procedures?)
5. What is the intended disposition of data obtained from testing? (e.g., how will confidentiality be assured?; under what conditions will individuals, other than the person tested, be permitted to seek and obtain access to the data?)
6. What plan will be used for communicating results to the person tested? (e.g., who will transmit the information?; if test results cannot be conveyed in person, how will the information be conveyed?; other than the person tested, who is to be informed of the test result?)
7. How is counselling to be accomplished? (e.g., who will counsel?; how will counsellors be trained and the adequacy of their performance be assured?; where will counselling services be provided?)
8. What is the social impact of screening? (e.g., will persons who are tested be deprived of legal or social rights that otherwise are protected?; are appropriate supplemental laboratory test procedures used to minimize false-positive results that are an inevitable part of screening tests? Persons falsely assumed to be seropositive also can suffer severe and unjust adverse consequences.)
9. What legal and ethical considerations are raised by the proposed screening programme? (e.g., is informed consent required?; are statutes or regulations in place that safeguard against breaches of confidentiality or intentional disclosure of personal information that is not necessary for public health purposes?)

The Special Programme on AIDS will provide consultation on the criteria and their application on request from member states.

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