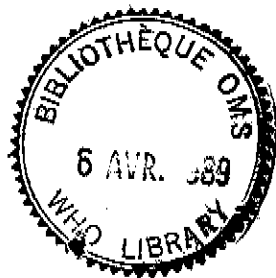

AIDS

Discrimination and Public Health

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World Health Organization



An address presented 13 June 1988 at the
IV International Conference on AIDS
Stockholm, Sweden

by

Kathleen Kay
Executive Assistant to the Director
Global Programme on AIDS



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The World Health Organization has taken a series of strong and proactive stands to help protect the rights of, and prevent discrimination against, persons infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). This position was recently reinforced last month in Geneva by the 41st World Health Assembly, which adopted a resolution entitled: "AIDS: Avoidance of Discrimination in Relation to HIV-Infected People and People with AIDS".

This resolution starts by urging Member States to "foster a spirit of understanding and compassion for HIV-infected people and people with AIDS through information, education and social support programmes". Experience with national and local AIDS programmes has suggested that as public information and education increases in quantity and quality, irrational fears about HIV and its transmission tend to diminish. Nevertheless, while people may understand that HIV cannot be spread through casual contact, the specific and individual instance of an HIV-infected child in a school or an HIV-infected adult in the workplace can still provoke unwarranted but substantial anxiety and can unveil deep-seated prejudices.

The World Health Assembly resolution urges WHO's 166 Nation Member States "to protect the human rights and dignity of HIV-infected people and people with AIDS and of members of population groups, and to avoid discriminatory action against and stigmatization of them in the provision of services, employment and travel." In addition, Member States are urged: "to ensure the confidentiality of HIV testing and to promote the availability of confidential counselling and other support services to HIV-infected people and people with AIDS."

There is a strong and clear public health rationale for this emphasis of protecting the human rights and dignity of HIV-infected persons, including people with AIDS. In fact, the World Health Assembly has stated that this policy is critical to the success of national and international AIDS prevention programmes. Therefore, the protection of the rights and dignity of HIV-infected persons has become an integral part of the Global Strategy on AIDS.

The Public Health Rationale:

The first objective of the Global AIDS Strategy is to prevent HIV transmission.

HIV spreads almost entirely through identifiable behaviours and specific actions (sexual intercourse, self-injecting behaviour) which are generally — though not always — subject to individual control. In most instances, HIV transmission involves the behaviour of two persons; a change in behaviour of either the HIV-infected or the uninfected persons will be sufficient to prevent HIV transmission. However, it must be remembered that HIV is transmitted mainly through behaviours (sexual, self-injecting) which are private, secret, hidden from society and illegal in some societies.

For these reasons, the following are critical elements in the design of programmes to prevent HIV infection:

- (a) The keystone of HIV prevention is information and education, as HIV transmission can be prevented through informed and responsible behaviour.
- (b) Each person, HIV-infected or uninfected, must bear in mind their responsibility not to put themselves or other persons at risk of infection with HIV.
- (c) In addition to information and education, specific health and social services will be required to support risk-reducing behaviour changes.

Nevertheless, if HIV infection or suspicion of HIV infection, leads to stigmatization and discrimination (e.g. loss of employment, forced separation from family, loss of education or housing), persons already HIV-infected and those who are concerned they may be infected will actively avoid detection and contact with health and social services will be lost. Those needing information, education, counselling or other support services would be "driven underground". The person who fears he or she may be infected would be reluctant to seek assistance out of fear of being reported — with severe personal consequences. The net result would be to seriously jeopardize educational outreach and thereby exacerbate the difficulty of preventing HIV infection.

To prevent HIV infection effectively, persons whose behaviours place them at increased risk of exposure to HIV must be informed, educated and provided with health and social support. Persons suspected or known to be HIV-infected should remain integrated with society to the maximum possible extent and be helped to assume responsibility for preventing HIV transmission to others. Exclusion of these persons would be unjustified in public health terms and would undermine the public health programme to prevent HIV infection.

For these reasons, discrimination may endanger public health; stigmatization may itself represent a threat to public health. The World Health Assembly resolution therefore directs WHO: "to stress to Member States and to all others concerned the dangers to the health of everyone of discriminatory action against and stigmatization of HIV-infected people and people with AIDS and members of population groups..."

In summary, protecting the human rights and dignity of HIV-infected people, including people with AIDS, and members of population groups, is not a luxury — it is a necessity. It is not a question of the "rights of the many" against the "rights of the few"; the protection of the uninfected majority depends upon and is inextricably bound with the protection of the rights and dignity of the infected persons.

The World Health Organization took advantage of the meeting on the Global Impact of AIDS in London in March of this year, to raise the issue and stress the need for the

involvement of the international human rights network to help prevent discrimination against HIV-infected people. Considerable interest has resulted, both from the official organizations with a mandate in the human rights field, and from an ever widening variety of non-governmental organizations.

We believe it will be essential for human rights organizations, non-governmental and governmental, to play an active and proactive role in this area. Such organizations, particularly at the national and local levels, must help prevent discrimination against HIV-infected persons, persons with AIDS, or stigmatized population groups. An informed and alerted human rights network can help through information and education about HIV and AIDS and through promotion of the human rights and dignity of all persons.

The human rights network will continue to require clear, accurate and up-to-date information on HIV infection and AIDS. The World Health Organization, which has been given the mandate to direct and coordinate the global fight against AIDS, stands ready to continue providing the human rights networks with the credible information upon which all effective public health and human rights action related to AIDS must depend. At the national level, organizations concerned with human rights must:

- link with AIDS-related organizations — NGO and governmental;
- work with national AIDS Committees to help broaden understanding and seek effective alliances against AIDS related discrimination.

The World Health Organization offers to human rights organizations full collaboration at global, regional and national levels. We are organizing missions to further inform and educate the human rights community about AIDS and the Public Health Rationale for protecting rights and dignity.

Thus, the World Health Assembly requested WHO: "to stress to Member States and to all others concerned the dangers to the health of everyone of discriminatory action against and stigmatization of HIV-infected people and people with AIDS and members of population groups, by continuing to provide accurate information on AIDS and guidance on its prevention and control". The Global Programme on AIDS is committed to this task. We must break new ground together and work together — to fight against AIDS — to protect human rights and dignity.



AIDS

A worldwide effort will stop it.