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Special
Programme
on **AIDS**

**Screening and
testing in
AIDS prevention
and control
programmes**

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Screening is the examination of entire populations or groups within populations to determine their infection or disease status.

Testing is the determination of infection or disease status for an individual.

During 1987, the Special Programme on AIDS worked with national authorities in over 100 countries to develop programmes for AIDS prevention and control. In this context, screening for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection has often been discussed to determine its role, if any, in national AIDS programmes. HIV screening involves many complex technical, logistical, social, legal and ethical issues; to help ensure their complete analysis and review, the Special Programme convened a meeting of health experts on screening for HIV infection*. The meeting listed a broad range of issues that must be considered, including:

- 1 the rationale of the proposed programme;
- 2 the population to be screened;
- 3 the test method to be used;
- 4 where the laboratory testing is to be done;
- 5 the intended use of data obtained from testing;
- 6 the plan for communicating results to the person tested;
- 7 how counselling is to be accomplished;
- 8 the social impact of screening;
- 9 legal and ethical considerations raised by the proposed screening programme.

In the light of:

- the Report of the Meeting of Experts;
- the experience of national programmes to date;
- current knowledge about HIV infection and AIDS;

the World Health Organization Special Programme on AIDS wishes to draw attention to the following issues related to screening and testing in AIDS prevention and control programmes.

- 1 **Screening programmes** for HIV infection can help:
 - prevent transmission through blood supplies, semen, tissues, or organs for transplant;
 - obtain epidemiological information on HIV prevalence or incidence.

- 2 **Whenever a screening programme** is under consideration, all the issues raised by the expert meeting should be explicitly addressed and resolved. Poorly designed or implemented HIV-screening programmes will be detrimental to public health, and will waste resources. Public health needs and human rights will be best served by carefully considering the entire range of technical, logistical, social, legal and ethical issues **before** deciding whether to proceed with any screening programme.

- 3 **Mandatory screening** for HIV has only a very limited role in programmes for AIDS prevention and control. Mandatory screening of donors is useful to prevent HIV transmission through blood, semen, or other cells, tissues or organs. This screening should involve informed consent and counselling and should ensure confidentiality.

- 4 **Serosurveys** help clarify the epidemiological pattern of HIV, which is useful to assess the areas and groups that need specific educational programmes or other preventive services. These surveys can be conducted using methods that do not threaten human rights. Such surveys can either involve informed consent and counselling and ensure confidentiality or they may be anonymous (no record of name or other specific identifiers).

- 5 **Voluntary HIV testing** may form part of medical care for suspected HIV-related illness and may also be provided as a service to individuals in conjunction with information and education, counselling and other support services to help promote sustained behaviour change. Voluntary HIV testing should involve informed consent and counselling and should ensure confidentiality.

- 6 **Voluntary HIV testing services** should be made widely available as part of AIDS prevention and control programmes, and access to such services should be facilitated.

* Single copies of the *Report of the Meeting on Criteria for HIV Screening Programmes, Geneva, 20-21 May 1987 (WHO/SPA/GLO/87.2)* can be obtained from the Special Programme on AIDS, WHO, Avenue Appia, CH-1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland.
