

Good news on AIDS front, new infections down by over 100,000

India had reassuring news on the HIV/AIDS front on World AIDS Day Tuesday. The number of HIV positive people in the country had declined by 400,000 over the last five years and new infections were down by at least 100,000 per year.

'In 2002, over 27 lakh (2.7 million) people in India were HIV positive. The number has gone down to 23 lakh (2.3 million) in 2007. We have reduced the number by over 400,000,' Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad said on the occasion of World AIDS Day here.

India is home to 2.3 million HIV positive people, third in terms of absolute numbers in the world. South Africa and Nigeria are the top two countries.

'AIDS is not spreading like earlier. It is stable now. Earlier, over 350,000 people were getting infected every year but for the last two years the new infections have reduced to 2 lakh to 2.5 lakh,' Ajay Khera, assistant director general of the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) told IANS.

He said the huge investment to tackle HIV/AIDS and the large-scale awareness drive were key in mobilizing people against the dreaded disease. 'The life span of HIV positive people has increased due to medical intervention and the use of condoms has also increased. These factors are primarily responsible for such a positive change,' Khera added.

He informed that over 200,000 people are also dying in India due to AIDS every year.

According to NACO, there are 5,000 counselling centres in India for HIV positive people. Of these, nearly 200 are providing treatment to infected people.

Over 240,000 people are currently under anti-retro viral treatment.

A first-line treatment costs the government around Rs.4,500 per person/year. However, the second-line treatment is very expensive around Rs.40,000 per person/year. The second line treatment is given when a patient develops resistance to the earlier drugs.

The NACO official said that the Red Ribbon Express Phase-II, which was flagged off by United Progressive Alliance chief Sonia Gandhi Tuesday morning, would spread awareness among rural people of 10,000 villages in 141 districts.

The Red Ribbon Express will halt in 152 stations in high prevalence areas during its year-long journey. It will disseminate information among the masses and 'try to unite people' by bridging the information gap between urban and rural areas and dispel the stigma about the disease.

'The last train (Red Ribbon Express - Phase I) was a tremendous success. This train is taking its message to far flung areas of our country. It will help in containing the disease from spreading,' the Congress chief said before flagging off the train at the Safdarjung Railway station here.

During its halts, volunteers will 'disseminate information regarding prevention and services. It will develop an understanding about the infection in order to reduce stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS'.

The eight-coach train with both doctors and volunteers on board will also strengthen people's knowledge about general health.

'This train will not only provide counselling but also locate people who need testing and anti-retroviral treatment. Those who need ARV will be referred to designated hospitals in the region by the doctors on board,' K. Chandramouli, director general of National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), told IANS.

'We will also provide treatment for sexually transmitted diseases (STIs) inside the train. The train will be linked with mobile health clinics at the district level,' he added.

Besides the direct intervention, there will also be folk troupes and exhibitions to create maximum awareness among people.

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