

Spiritual leaders steer HIV/AIDS care in India

Spiritual leaders, including Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Bishop Lawrence Pius Dorai Raj, have come together to fight HIV/AIDS, stressing the need for preventive care for a disease that has hit five million Indians.

They discussed HIV/AIDS care, giving the much-needed prophetic voice to the stigma and discrimination related to the disease. Many of them head groups that care for HIV infected people, providing them counselling as well.

At the third global inter-faith coalition meet on HIV/AIDS here over the weekend, leaders from varying religions exchanged ideas on spreading awareness about the illness and the importance of providing patients love and care.

Spiritual gurus like Sadguru Jaggi Vasudev, Ponnambala Adigalar and Sadhvi Sadhana were also present at the meet organised by Voluntary Health, Education and Rural Development Society (Vherds).

'Without the body, there can be no soul,' said Vasudev, whose Isha Foundation runs 2,432 mobile help clinics in 2,000 Tamil Nadu villages, assisting in care programmes.

According to Vherds, faith-based bodies have 'historically provided a vital network for community based work'. It stresses that these groups should play the key role in 'compassionate care' for HIV/AIDS infected.

The conference also saw the presence of Nawab of Arcot Mohammad Abdul Ali, Phillip Kuruvilla of the Christian Conference of Asia and Dato J. Jegathesan of the International Sai Samaj, Malaysia.

The Sikh faith was represented by Manjit Singh, the Baha'is by Nicole Mohajer and the Zoroastrians by Dame Meher Master Moos - all three well-known medical practitioners.

'AIDS and HIV care is a difficult task', Vasudev told IANS. 'One must win the trust of the people, otherwise it is not possible to provide care.

'There has to be close relationship between the care giver and the community. We have won that trust, and our mobile clinics are able to offer assistance in remote rural areas', he added.

'It is also very important to ensure that no discrimination is made on the basis of religion in giving care to HIV/AIDS victims, said Vasudev.

Sujatha Rao, director of National Aids Control Organisation (NACO), Rabia Mathai of the Christian Medical Board, New York, Denis Broun of UNAID, Robert M. Clay of USAID and Po Lin Chain of WHO also made presentations.

Issues like care for commercial sex workers and result-oriented programmes to fight discrimination were also debated.

Indian Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss and Tamil Nadu Health Minister K.K.S.S.R.

Ramachandran graced the podium.

Ramadoss said India was considering the option of providing drug addicts with 'safe needles' to bring down HIV/AIDS infection from the use of the same needle by several people repeatedly.

'The health ministry is in consultation with the ministry of law and the home ministry on how to do this legally,' he said.

Ramadoss added that the bill against discrimination of AIDS patients would be introduced in the 2007 budget session.

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