

Beat: Miscellaneous

WHO calls on China to do more to curb HIV spread

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USPA News - The World Health Organization (WHO) on Monday called on China to do more to curb the spread of HIV in the country, a day after government figures showed that about half a million of its population has been diagnosed with HIV or its precursor AIDS since the mid-1980s. Dr. Bernhard Schwartländer, the World Health Organization's representative to China, said China had made "incredible progress" since the late 1990s by setting up a massive national network of needle exchanges and methadone centers, which resulted in a marked reduction of HIV prevalence among people who inject drugs.

These days, however, the HIV epidemic in China is now largely driven by sexual transmission, and in particular among men who have sex with men, where HIV infections are on the rise, though heterosexuals are also at risk. "We must do better than this, starting with making safe sex 'sexy,'" Dr. Schwartländer said. "We need to find new, interesting, innovative, effective ways of promoting safe sex in China, especially including condom use. Because every new HIV infection is one too many: every new infection is one that could have been avoided." There are also other areas of concern, in particular the distribution of antiretroviral drugs that defer HIV infections from progressing to full-blown AIDS. The Chinese government provides such drugs free of charge to couples when one partner is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative, but the antiretroviral treatment regime is far more complicated than in other countries. "People taking antiretroviral drugs in China have to take 5 or 6 pills every day. In most parts of Africa and the rest of Asia - including some of the poorest countries in the world - people on antiretrovirals need to take just one pill per day, in a fixed dose combination," Dr. Schwartländer explained. "By not making this fixed dose combination available here, China is falling behind the pack." Other concerns are the many people - estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands - who are unaware of their HIV infection. Figures released by the Chinese government on Sunday showed that more than 497,000 people across the country have been diagnosed with HIV or its precursor AIDS since the country's first case in 1985, which represents an increase of 63,000 new cases from September 2013. "Perhaps most importantly, we must eliminate stigma and discrimination towards people living with HIV, and at-risk populations such as men who have sex with men, sex workers, and injecting drug users," Dr. Schwartländer added. "I've seen some of my own colleagues in the medical profession turn patients away because they disapproved of the person's sexual orientation. That is simply unacceptable, and it has to stop."

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com