

Pakistan OBSERVER

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 14, 2006

Unscreened blood: a major threat for spread of HIV and AIDS

ASHRAF ANSARI

World Blood Donors Day is an important occasion as it reminds the world of the need to adopt greater safety measures for provision of safe and screened blood.

Transfusion increases the risk of transmitting HIV, especially in places where there is no adequate screening of blood. Apart from that, it creates an unavoidable shortage in blood supply.

This encourages professional donors to become more active, reducing the safety of the supply. It is estimated that 40 percent of the 1.5 million annual blood transfusions in Pakistan are not screened for HIV. As early as 1998, the AIDS Surveillance Center in Karachi conducted a study of professional blood donors—people who are typically very poor, often drug users, who give blood for money.

The study found that 20 percent were infected with Hepatitis C, 10 percent with Hepatitis B, and 1 percent with HIV. About 20 percent of the blood transfused comes from professional donors. In proceeding years the situation is got worse instead improving.

Raia Khalid Mehmood Presi-

dent Pakistan National AIDS consortium, in his statement issued on the occasion of World Blood Donors Day emphasized the need of provision of safe and screened blood for preventing the spread of HIV and AIDS in Pakistan. He said though Government of Pakistan has introduced laws for the provision of safe blood and there are government structures in place for ensuring the provision of safe blood for the patients, yet on ground the situation remains quite alarming.

The number of unregistered blood banks still operating in all parts of the country is still very high.

These blood banks are providing unscreened and unsafe blood to the needy patients and thus becoming a major cause of spread of HIV and AIDS in Pakistan. He said that Pakistan has a narrow window of opportunity to act immediately and decisively to prevent a widespread HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Mr. Qadeer Baig National Manager PNAC said that without vigorous and sustained action, Pakistan runs the risk of experiencing the overwhelming social and economic impact of a full-blown HIV/AIDS epidemic.

It is of utmost importance to ensure mandatory screening of blood and blood products for all blood-borne infections in the public and private sector in line with Blood Transfusion Act.

He stressed at the need is to conduct educate voluntary blood donation and encourage voluntary blood donations as presently of 15% of the total blood supply is through voluntary donations and 75% was through replacement. If we want to ensure that constant sustained supply of healthy blood, we will have to increase the ratio of voluntary unpaid donations and for this we need to educate our youth about the importance of the issue.

Pakistan National AIDS Consortium is the network of 350 NGOs working for the prevention and control of HIV and AIDS in Pakistan. PNAC's aim is to prevent the AIDS epidemic from engulfing the general population.

PNAC advocates on behalf of the people living with HIV/AIDS as well as other vulnerable and marginalized groups, to create an environment of openness, gender equality, free access to services and respect for human rights