

Dear all

Injecting drug use (IDU) is well known as a way to spread HIV, as are ways to prevent HIV transmission among injecting drug users (IDUs). But the growing number of developing countries experiencing new and uncontrolled HIV spread among drug users demonstrates that many communities currently lack the capacity to control these epidemics.

Economic, political and social changes are compounding this situation and increasing peoples' susceptibility and vulnerability. Fear, denial and discrimination are also making HIV prevention among injecting drug users a low national and global priority, despite the huge threat this problem poses to development. Today we are sharing with you an article which elaborates different aspects of Injecting Drug Use.

## Injecting Drug Use

### Injecting drug use and HIV infection

- HIV is effectively transmitted by the sharing of injecting equipment
- The re-use of contaminated needles and syringes by different people is common in many settings in which injecting drug use takes place
- Illicit and licit drugs are injected in many parts of the world, especially in regions where poverty, homelessness, migration and other social-economic problems are common
- The reasons for reuse of injecting equipment are various and include lack of availability or access to needles and syringes, poverty, lack of information about HIV and IDU, socio-psychological and cultural factors such as a sense of camaraderie, connection and feelings of solidarity, displacement, dislocation and alienation
- HIV spreads from IDUs to their sexual partners and children
- The greatest increases in HIV among IDUs are occurring in some of the world's poorest and most populous countries.

### Drug users: high risk, but low priority

Drug users face widespread stigma and discrimination which, coupled with the fact that they may be living under extremely disadvantaged conditions, render them particularly vulnerable to HIV infection.

Injecting drug users are not a homogenous group: people inject drugs in all countries, among many different ethnic groups, in both rural and urban areas. Nonetheless, common to many IDUs in developing regions are a set of socio-economic conditions which combine to make drug users highly vulnerable to HIV. These conditions include:

- Homelessness
- Inadequate consideration of the needs of young people
- Unemployment and poverty
- Poor health status
- Involvement in commercial sex work
- Imprisonment and human rights abuses

- Widespread stigma and discrimination
- Marginalization from the broader community.

In urban settings, drug users are often uneducated, homeless or living in slum conditions. In rural areas, they are located in remote regions where drugs are produced and trafficked. In both instances, drug users have little access to the support, information and services necessary to protect them from becoming infected with HIV.

### Why are more people using drugs?

Increases in the numbers of drug users in Asia and Central and Eastern Europe have been closely linked to situations of massive unemployment, high demand for drugs together with expansion of informal economies including drug trafficking.

Drug use increases with social and economic dislocation, rising unemployment, psychological stress, and inadequate health care. The behaviour which places IDUs at risk of HIV infection is the consequence of specific social and political factors. These are exacerbated by the social, economic and political changes occurring in Asia and Central Eastern Europe. Shifts in trade, communication and migration, for example, facilitate the transfer of knowledge about techniques of drug consumption, encouraging new routes of drug administration such as injecting.

### Why do people inject drugs?

Several factors contribute to the trend toward injecting drugs. These include the presence of other forms of drug taking, the influence of migrating drug users, the custom of injecting for self-medication, involvement in the cultivation and manufacture of drugs, proximity to drug trafficking routes and the availability of drugs which are easy to inject. Socio-psychological factors contributing to the appeal of injecting may include the illicit, rebellious and potentially dangerous nature of the activity, together with the pleasure and pain which may result from it.

Economic factors also influence drug use patterns. People inject because it is cheaper and faster-acting than other methods. When illicit drugs become more scarce as a result of drug control efforts, it becomes uneconomical for the drug user to smoke or inhale the drug, as much of it is lost in smoke. Injectable forms of drugs are also more easily concealed.

### Why do people share needles?

Reasons for sharing injecting equipment include scarcity or cost (of needles and syringes), lack of information and awareness about the risks associated with sharing, cultural practices, and legal or policing barriers to availability or use of equipment.

Sharing of injecting equipment is embedded within the social context in which drug use takes place. For example, the sharing of contaminated injecting equipment may arise because IDUs fear that, while carrying needles and syringes, they will be stopped by police who will use possession of drug paraphernalia as evidence of a drug-related crime. Instead of purchasing or obtaining a new needle and syringe, users prefer to use the specific needle and syringe in use where the drugs are purchased or consumed and be able to leave the scene without carrying any equipment on their person.

These situations give rise to 'shooting galleries': locations where the needles and syringes provided by a dealer are used in rapid succession, without adequate (if any) sterilization between use, by a number of different users. For a fee, professional injectors administer to 'clients' the drugs which they have purchased, and in so doing, provide a potential hazard for transmitting HIV and other blood-borne viruses.

## Reasons for needle sharing

- Sharing behaviour is a culturally or socially accepted practice
- People are unable to access or afford new needles
- Lack of access to information on safe injecting
- Intoxication during injecting
- Injecting is an extension of a sexual relationship.

However, increasing the availability and accessibility of sterile injecting equipment, while fundamentally important, may be insufficient in itself to control the spread of HIV among drug users in the absence of action to address contextual factors which impact upon the health and well-being of drug users.

IDU is embedded in specific social and cultural contexts. Its most salient feature is its illegality. Because they participate in one illegal activity, IDUs are generally stigmatized, discriminated against or excluded from access to health services. They are subject to human rights violations, and despite their numbers and vulnerability, constitute a low priority in terms of their health and welfare.

## Why does sexual transmission of HIV occur among injecting drug users?

A high correlation has been noted between injecting drug use and other risk behaviors; virtually all studies of risk behaviour among injecting drug users, in both developed and developing countries, find that they are sexually active with both injecting and non-injecting partners and that they use condoms infrequently. The following factors link injecting drug use to sexual transmission of HIV:

- Male to male and heterosexual transmission involving IDU
- Commercial sex among partners of IDUs and amongst female IDU
- STD are common among IDU
- Intoxication during intercourse is common
- Safer sex practices among IDUs are uncommon
- IDUs have poor access to STD prevention services.

## **PNAC Resource Centre**

**Noman Farooq**

Senior program Associate

PAKISTAN NATIONAL AIDS CONSORTIUM

House No 441, Street 57, Sector I 8/3 Islamabad

Email: [noman@pnac.net.pk](mailto:noman@pnac.net.pk)

[www.pnac.net.pk](http://www.pnac.net.pk)

[www.aidspnac.org](http://www.aidspnac.org)