

AIDS prevention and

IT WAS INTERESTING THAT THE NEWS ITEM (*Daily Times*, December 8, front page) about the role of religious leaders in HIV/AIDS prevention was captioned: "Many Maulvis involved in child abuse: minister". The spread of the virus causing AIDS is unfortunately a serious matter. Few statistics are available in Pakistan about most matters pertaining to social behaviour especially concerning sex and sexual activity. However, the same is true of many countries in the world. The initial investigation into the mechanism of spread of AIDS in the US was considerably hampered by reluctance of both the researchers and the patients to tackle the question of sexual behaviour. It was only when the spread of the virus was clearly linked with male homosexuality that it became the subject of study. Still it would be counterproductive to focus just on such sexual behaviour when trying to control the spread of AIDS.

In a country like Pakistan, the spread of this disease is more likely to occur from improper sterilisation of surgical instruments, reuse of needles and syringes for injections, and inappropriate blood transfusion. Already, Pakistan is in the throes of a major epidemic of liver diseases (hepatitis) that are spread in a similar way. Once AIDS enters this 'pool' its spread will also be guaranteed. The major culprits in this matter are quacks and roadside dentists that offer medical treatments, minor dental work and injections to unsuspecting patients who end up worse off by becoming infected with serious diseases. Unfortunately, even some members of the regular medical community and hospitals are not immune to

practices that create the possibility of transmission of these diseases to their patients.

Unprotected sexual activity remains an important means of transmission of this disease, but inappropriate medical treatment is potentially the major means of spread in Pakistan. It is always easier to blame such spread on "aberrant" sexual behaviour rather than bad medicine therefore it is necessary to focus on what is likely to be the primary mechanism of transmission of AIDS in this society and concentrate a major part of our resources in that area. Unregulated medical and dental practices have many dangerous consequences, but the transmission of the AIDS virus along with the viruses responsible for causing hepatitis have created a real problem that needs to be addressed urgently. Different estimates already put the incidence of a potentially lethal form of hepatitis in the country at around one in fifteen people.

Many of the elite feel protected because they have access to modern facilities and well trained physicians but such a feeling of security is based on false assumptions. Unfortunately AIDS does not respect social distinctions and once the virus has spread into the population the infection can occur from almost any breach of technique in a hospital that on the surface seems to be quite modern. It is important to understand that the virus can skip social strata through unprotected and promiscuous sex or intravenous drug abuse. The rich and privileged are not immune from either of these societal aberrations. Therefore, the greatest danger is to presume that it is a disease of only the homosexuals or the poor.

VIEW

Children
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The role of seminaries in case of child sexual abuse is analogous to the recent scandals that hit the Catholic Church in the US. Initially the Church and its supporters tried to underplay the problem but incessant public pressure forced them to accept their culpability. Today, allegations are no longer ignored; they are taken up aggressively

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Though there are many laws on the books that criminalise bad medical practices, they are rarely enforced. The tendency is to make new laws rather than insist on the enforcement of existing laws. This should be avoided and regulatory agencies that oversee delivery of health care should be strengthened. This will have many important and beneficial results, AIDS prevention being only one of them. At this time, a majority of people in this country receive their initial medical care from unlicensed practitioners and in inadequately regulated clinics and hospitals. As such, by the time they gain access to a proper health care facility, much harm has already been done. A complete overhaul of the health care delivery system is desperately needed. Perhaps the threat of an impending AIDS epidemic can provide just the necessary impetus.

Clearly, Pakistan does not have the resources needed to change how health care is delivered from the bottom up. But, it is important that two problems be tackled immediately. First is the delivery of health care by unlicensed and unsupervised providers. Second is the abuse of blood transfusion. The fact that there is no central organisation that obtains and stores blood is without doubt a national disgrace. It is imperative that all blood donations be safe and free from any infection and that blood should only be transfused when absolutely necessary. Safety of the nation's blood supply is one area where financial as well as technical help from international agencies would indeed be invaluable.

As far as sexual abuse of children is concerned, that

stands alone as perhaps the most heinous crime known to man. Whether this has anything to do with the spread of the virus that causes AIDS is immaterial. But sexual abuse of children must be looked at in the context of general abuse of children prevalent in this society. Child labourers, child beggars and children washing windshields at traffic crossings are all examples of child abuse. A general environment that degrades children also lends itself to sexual abuse. Education and close monitoring of environments where children are exposed to such dangers can decrease the incidence of such activity. Fortunately sexual abuse of children is restricted to a few sexual predators and can be controlled if not entirely eliminated.

The role of religious seminaries in this matter is analogous to the recent scandals that hit the Catholic Church in the US. Initially the Church and its supporters put up a serious fight to underplay the extent and the severity of sexual abuse by members of the priesthood but incessant public pressure forced them to accept their culpability. Today, the Church has become sensitised to this issue and allegations of sexual abuse are no longer ignored but are aggressively taken up. If sufficient pressure is applied on our religious leadership, they may also come to a similar conclusion and make efforts to rid seminaries of this evil. A society that does not try to protect its children can never claim to be civilised.

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