

Social Science and AIDS in Southeast Asia

The Challenge of Antiretroviral Treatments



Department of Health, Taiwan

A Taiwanese AIDS prevention pamphlet in the early 1990s gives out warnings to discourage heterosexual men from visiting prostitutes or porn-related places.

By Sophie Le Coeur & Maurice Eisenbruch

When studying the dynamics of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it is crucial to take into account the cultural, social, economic, and political contexts of affected countries. These contexts affect perceptions and representations of HIV/AIDS, the process of negotiating stigma in local societies, and the effectiveness of NGO interventions and government policies. For example, the pattern of HIV transmission from commercial sex workers to young males, who then transmit the virus to their regular partners and in due course to their children, is common to Thailand and Cambodia. The mechanisms, behaviours, and cultural beliefs underpinning this pattern of transmission may be different among the countries, however, and need to be better understood if prevention campaigns are to be maximally effective.

Anthropological, sociological, psychological, demographic, and economic studies on HIV in Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, China, Cambodia, and South India were presented and debated at the international workshop 'Social

A Taiwanese AIDS prevention poster from 2000 targeted at heterosexual men.



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Of the 40 million persons living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2003, UNAIDS estimates 7.4 million to be in Asia (UNAIDS, WHO, 2003). Last year, Asia witnessed one million new HIV infections and 500,000 AIDS-related deaths. In contrast to Sub-Saharan Africa where HIV is spread almost exclusively through heterosexual contact and mother-to-child transmission, Southeast Asia counts among its major routes of infection homosexual contacts, needle sharing among intravenous drug users, and unsafe medical procedures. Southeast Asia's silent epidemic is now spreading into the general heterosexual population of child-bearing age: the increased likelihood for mother-to-child transmissions may well have major consequences for child mortality.

Science and AIDS in Southeast Asia: Inventory of Research Projects, Priorities and Prospects for the Future'.¹ At the centre of deliberations were the complexity of interacting processes placing individuals at risk, and the significance of cultural, spatial, and economic contexts to the spread, prevention, and treatment of HIV/AIDS.²

Three research projects, carried out by People Living with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam and Thailand, were presented during the workshop, addressing issues of culturally competent counselling, informed consent, patient's rights, ethics, and confidentiality.³ The response of patients and communities to this medical and human catastrophe has irrevocably altered the fight against HIV/AIDS. Pressure has been put on public and private research funding agencies, and on the pharmaceutical industry to speed up the development of drugs, decrease their costs and increase their availability. Given new technologies such as the internet, for the first time in the history of medicine, patients are becoming as knowledgeable about their disease as their physicians. In any case, patients can no longer be considered mere research 'subjects'; they are actively involved in developing and implementing the research projects.

Antiretroviral treatments are now becoming available to treat patients and to prevent mother-to-child transmissions. It is of utmost importance to study how these new drugs are received at the individual level, how medical staff are adapting their practices in the light of local cultural beliefs and practices, and how society is changing its perceptions towards the disease. During the session on the representation/perception of HIV/AIDS, Mei-Ling Hsu from the National Chengchi University in Taiwan emphasized the need for redesigning public health campaigns in the light of antiretrovirals availability, and the role social science research can play in shaping public health messages.

The impact of HIV/AIDS on society was studied from various perspectives.⁴ Two studies presented the socio-economic impact of AIDS orphans on families, and adult deaths on elderly parents (R.M. Safman, J. Knodel). Another study carried out in Northern Thailand presented the potential demographic consequences of combined fertility decline, outmigration and AIDS (H. Jones). With the spread of antiretroviral treatments, the impact of AIDS at the micro and macro levels of society will need to be reconsidered, and, as the disease switches from a fatal to a chronic one, it is likely that gradually, AIDS patients will suffer less from stigmatization as shown by papers about China and Singapore (E. Micollier, O. Shir Nee).

The prevention of mother-to-child transmission is a good example of a feasible, highly effective intervention to reduce the number of children infected with HIV. However, few suc-

cessful programmes have so far been implemented in Asia. For programmes to be effective, traditional infant feeding patterns and cultural beliefs and practices surrounding birth need to be renegotiated (P. Hancart-Petitot, F. Pittolo, S. Talawat). In the confrontation between the one-size-fits-all biomedical knowledge advanced by Western programmes and maternity practices rooted in traditional and symbolic values, it is difficult for women to make informed choices (S. Crochet).

The challenges in confronting the HIV epidemic remain enormous and social science has a key role to play. As Michel Kazatchkine, Director of the French National Agency of AIDS Research (ANRS), stated in his keynote address: 'Prevention and treatment mutually reinforce each other and should be considered as part of an integrated approach to care. With the decreasing cost of antiretrovirals, wider access to treatment may become a reality'.

M. Eisenbruch presented the cultural construction of the causes, prevention, and treatment of HIV/AIDS in Cambodia, including mother-to-child transmission, based on fieldwork with monks, traditional healers, and villagers. Representations of treatment and compliance, perceptions of life with and without antiretrovirals, the use of local resources and 'key opinion leaders', and ethical issues such as confidentiality will require better understanding if culturally competent treatment is to become a reality (F. Bourdier).

The workshop was a great success and opportunity for strengthening contacts among social scientists researching AIDS in Southeast Asia. It enabled researchers to share the methods and results of their projects, to identify training and capacity-building needs and research priorities. Understanding the radical changes associated with the introduction of antiretroviral treatments will now be the main challenge for social scientists researching AIDS in Southeast Asia. <

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- 1 The workshop was organized by M.E. Blanc, M. de Loenzien and S. Le Coeur on behalf of the Site Asie of the National Agency for AIDS Research in France.
- 2 These topics were discussed by: S. Ahmed, M.E. Blanc, D. Colby, M. de Loenzien, M. Eisenbruch, B. Ferry, W. Im-Em, E. Lelièvre, Le Van Son, Nguyen Minh Thang, A.M. Moulin, L. Pardthaisong-Chaipanich, Nguyen Thi Bich Van, Nguyen Tran Lam.
- 3 By: Nguyen Anh Thuan, L. Maher, V. Nopachai, Bui Quang Thuy, J. Permtunyangum, L. Messersmith.
- 4 These topics were discussed by: Y. Goudineau, P. Kunstadter, M. Muecke.

Information >

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