



AIDS Concern response to the Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS

The following viewpoints are based on the recent document namely “Draft Recommended HIV/AIDS Strategies for Hong Kong 2007 – 2011” (hereafter “Strategy”), released by the Advisory Council on AIDS in early January 2007.

Overall speaking, the Strategy is able to reflect the growing AIDS epidemic in Hong Kong, with a focus on the importance of targeted prevention following the growth of the epidemic. The establishment of the targets serves as important directions for the stakeholders in the coming years. However, these targets are not achievable without the Government taking the lead. AIDS Concerns believes it is crucial for Hong Kong to ride on the existing resources and experiences to scale up the fight against HIV/AIDS.

1. Role of the Government and facilitation of multi-sectorial responses

The Strategy has rightly pointed out the importance of collective effort by various stakeholders. AIDS Concern recommends the Government to take up a leadership role in such collective effort. We believe a proactive manner by the Government will help to achieve the targets successfully. Such recommendation echoes with the working principles of China’s Action Plan for Reducing and Preventing the Spread of HIV/AIDS (2006 – 2010) that “the Government takes the leadership and organizational role and every department has its own specific responsibility with the whole society participation.”

During 2007 – 2011, AIDS Concern would like to see a consistent effort by various Government bureaux on the following three key issues:

1.1 Condoms should not be used as evidence for prosecution of vice establishments and sex workers

While the Department of Health is diligently promoting safer sex and the use of condom, on the other hand, condoms are still used as evidence to prosecute establishments and sex workers. There have been numerous incidents that condoms were confiscated by the police when establishments were being cracked down. We understand the Secretary for Security replied to a Legislative Council member’s question on the possession of condoms and lubricant as evidence and charged with prostitution, that the Police will not make an arrest solely on the ground that items such as condoms or lubricants are seized from the person concerned, and this type of internal guidelines had not been issued. However, a reply (for internal reference only) from the Department of Immigration to the Convener of Sex Workers and Sex Workers’ Clients Working Group, Community Assessment and Evaluation, that “the act of possession of lubricant

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and condoms which are known to be accessories in the trade of prostitution provides only part of the relevant evidence to the offence. The Government must act in a consistent manner in promoting condom use and banishing the use of condoms as evidence for prosecution. AIDS Concern encourages the Government to take the reference from Thailand's 100% condom use programme and role of police in ensuring sex establishments to provide condoms to sex workers and their clients.

1.2 Free clinical service for non-eligible persons using the Social Hygiene Service

The Strategy has raised an important issue on sex workers and their clients in accessing HIV prevention services and STI screening and treatment services. Currently non-eligible persons (NEPs) are required to pay full fare when using the Social Hygiene Services. AIDS Concern, together with members of the Hong Kong Coalition of AIDS Service Organizations had pointed out to the Health Welfare and Food Bureau that such fee-charging is indeed a barrier to NEPs in accessing Social Hygiene Services. Such mechanism poses serious threat to the public's health while imposing obstacles in treating and monitoring STIs in Hong Kong. Such fee charging will also become a barrier for The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) to implement its Strategic Plan on Prevention and Controllable Communicable Disease 2007 – 2009, in which the CHP has committed itself in enhancing surveillance on different STIs. AIDS Concern is urging the Government to provide free STIs screening and treatment services to any users to prevent the STIs from spreading.

1.3 Inclusion of sex education as a compulsory curriculum in primary and secondary schools

The Education and Manpower Bureau should make sex education as a compulsory curriculum in primary and secondary schools. In earlier years, the Department of Education has produced various tool kits and guidelines to assist and facilitate the implementation of sex education in schools. However, sex education is still not a compulsory curriculum and therefore many schools can choose not to deliver sex education subject to various reasons and limitations, such as a tight curriculum time schedule. As sex education being part of the school moral and civic education as one of the Key Tasks under the education reform, however, it is not explicitly stated as one of the Key Learning Areas. The level and format of sex education being delivered to students is based on individual school decisions, and is various. AIDS Concern believes it is crucial for the EMB to mandate schools to include topics such as HIV/AIDS, STIs, sexuality and reproductive health and skills to maintain sexual health in the curriculum as these are indeed life-saving tools for young people.

2. Implementation and Monitoring

To achieve the eight targets as set in the Strategy, AIDS Concern believes the key word is **IMPLEMENTATION**. The eight targets have lay down the key prevention and care directions. The next step is for the Advisory Council on AIDS (ACA), together with stakeholders, to work together and formulate action plans of “what needs to be done by who and when”. Such plan is crucial for monitoring and evaluation, and of course, to enable the achievement of various targets. AIDS Concern recommends the ACA to take a leadership role in coordinating such effort. The leadership role is also in line with the

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“One National AIDS Coordinating Authority, with a multi-sector mandate” as in the “Three Ones” principles advocated by UNAIDS. Setting up sub committees or workgroups will help to facilitate the coordination process.

3. Funding mechanism of the Council of the AIDS Trust Fund

It is encouraging to see ACA’s recommendation on reviewing the Council of the AIDS Trust Fund (ATF) funding mechanism in order to improve effective funding of community-based responses. Assuming there is an open consultation process, stakeholders, especially AIDS NGOs and vulnerable communities, should be actively involved in the review. We would like to know who (or which Department) would lead the review process. AIDS Concern would like to reiterate that funding priorities should be based on epidemiological evidence, follow the trend of the epidemic, address the needs of the most at-risk as well as maintain the flexibility in meeting the changing needs of the hard-to-reach populations.

Besides, AIDS Concern would like to urge the Panel on Health Services to examine the allocation of funding by the ATF and the extent and proportion of the fund in addressing the growing epidemic to maximize transparency of the process. The recent Special Project Fund for Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) HIV prevention and care programmes is a good initiative in responding to the growing HIV epidemic within this community. However, AIDS Concern would like the ATF to examine, as soon as possible, the sustainability of such special fund as well as expanding the scope of the fund to cross border travelers in view of the escalating HIV/AIDS cases within the region, particularly in China.

In addition, The Council of the ATF should regard (AIDS) NGOs as partners in the fight against HIV/AIDS. (AIDS) NGOs should be consulted for any changes in the ATF funding priorities and/or allocation.

4. Great Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA principle)

Sustaining access to quality treatment and care for people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) is crucial in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. However, the GIPA Principle is not being mentioned in any parts in the Strategy. PHAs should not only be regarded as service recipients but partners in prevention and care. AIDS Concern urges the ACA to advocate for greater and meaningful participation of PHAs at various levels, particularly in the ACA structure.

5. Reducing AIDS Stigma

AIDS related stigma has long been recognized as a crucial barrier to effective HIV/AIDS prevention and care. Despite of its importance, Hong Kong still lacks the effort to address such issues. As stigma prevails in the general public towards HIV/AIDS and its infected and affected communities, self-stigma among these communities is also rampant. AIDS related stigma posed serious barriers to HIV testing, access to treatment and prevention services as well as the well being of the infected and affected communities.

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AIDS Concern strongly recommends the Government to step up its effort in fighting AIDS related stigma to both the infected and affected communities. Strategies including PHAs empowerment, Anti-stigma Campaign targeting general and specific populations and a strengthened execution of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) are recommended. These are necessary efforts to tackle self-stigma, enacted stigma as well as stigma which prevails subtly in our society.

6. The years after 2011

The growing AIDS epidemic in Hong Kong requires responses in a timely manner. Multi-sectorial responses from the Government and coordinated effort by key players in responding to the challenges of HIV/AIDS are crucial in the next few years. While the ACA is finalizing its Strategy for 2007 – 2011, we need to start asking ourselves how to translate the recommendations into actions in the next few years, in order to achieve the goals and targets set. What we do, how we do and when we do will have huge impact to 2011 onwards. ACA, together with other key players should start to formulate an ongoing monitoring and evaluation process, and plan for the next round strategy development.

7. Conclusion

HIV is a preventable disease. The main transmission route of HIV in Hong Kong is through sexual contact, therefore, the primary focus of prevention should be on condom use promotion. The recent detection of HIV clusters and escalating HIV cases in the MSM community posed a wake-up call to our society that prompt action is required immediately in order to reverse the situation and prevent HIV from spreading further.

AIDS Concern is committed to keep HIV prevalence low in Hong Kong. We are also committed to partner with the Government and other key players to achieve this shared mission.

Date: March 1, 2007

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