



Acting Minister of Public Health Dr Ahmad Jan Naeem highlighted the Ministry's support for the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Ministry of Public Health's national AIDS control programme and United Nations (UN) agencies represented by WHO, together with civil society partners and people living with HIV/AIDS, marked World AIDS Day 2014 at an event held in Kabul on 1 December.

The regional theme for this year's World AIDS Day is "Treat for life. Prevent for life". Recent medical advancements in treating people living with HIV with antiretroviral therapy (ART) in the right combination of medicines mean the virus can be controlled and reduced to undetectable levels in the body.

Speaking at the event, Acting Minister of Public Health Dr Ahmad Jan Naeem said: "The Ministry of Public Health is committed to improving the coverage of antiretroviral therapy so that every person in need has access to HIV treatment. Our goal is zero new infections, zero deaths and zero discrimination."

Globally, around 35 million people are living with HIV, and in 2013, 1.5 million people died from HIV-related causes. According to UNAIDS and WHO data, there were an estimated 4500 people living with HIV in Afghanistan as of 2013. However, only 214 people are currently registered and receiving ART treatment.

Addressing the audience, the Vice President of Afghanistan, Mr Sarwer Danish, noted that injecting drug users are the biggest at-risk group for HIV/AIDS in the country, with recent data showing a 4.4 per cent HIV prevalence rate for this group. "The new government is committed to increasing our efforts to work with injecting drug users, improving access to services and decreasing the transmission of HIV," Mr Danish said.

Provision of HIV testing, improving service quality and enrolling eligible people in life-long treatment are among the challenges that need to be tackled in Afghanistan. Provision of a full package of harm reduction activities, including opioid substitution therapy (OST), is an effective approach for the prevention and treatment of HIV among people who inject drugs.

“We must work much harder to fight stigma and discrimination, which remain huge obstacles to all forms of prevention, treatment, care and support. Empowerment is critical for an effective response, and most especially so for prevention,” said Dr Akif Saatcioglu, Medical Officer at WHO. “We must do much more to empower the key affected populations, to help them have access to testing, counseling and treatment and to act as agents of change. Population groups which are considered at high risk must have knowledge, skills and services to protect themselves and others”.

The establishment of ART centres, capacity-building of health professionals, implementation of a full package of harm reduction interventions for people who inject drugs supported by WHO, and the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) regional centres supported by UNICEF were all mentioned as crucial interventions in the fight against HIV/AIDS. A Member of Parliament stressed the importance of addressing people who inject drugs in Afghanistan, who are the most marginalized but also the most at-risk group for contracting HIV/AIDS.

A person living with HIV delivered a speech at the event, describing the improvements he has observed in people’s attitudes regarding the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS. “Before, I used to face a lot of stigma and restrictions. However, with the help of the national AIDS control programme, I now know my rights and understand I can have access to health facilities and services. I can work just like other people and have the right to an education,” he said.

The event was attended by the mass media, Members of Parliament, and representatives of various ministries, civil society organizations, UN agencies and people living with HIV/AIDS.

[World AIDS Day 2014](#)

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