

This year, the world celebrated World AIDS Day on 1 December as HIV/AIDS continued to have a significant impact on populations and economies worldwide, and particularly on the people living with HIV. Globally, the number of people living with HIV is increasing. Since the beginning of the epidemic, there have been more than 25 million deaths due to HIV-related causes, and every minute another 5 people die as a result of HIV/AIDS. As well, there are nearly five new HIV infections for every two people put on treatment.

In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, an estimated 55 000 new infections occurred in 2007. An estimated 33 000 deaths occurred due to HIV/AIDS in the same year. The estimated number of HIV-infected people in need of antiretroviral treatment by the end of 2008 was more than 150 000. The reported number of people receiving antiretroviral treatment by the end of 2008 was less than 12 000.

Despite the tireless efforts to fight the disease, the situation of people living with HIV is made worse by the fact that discrimination deprives them of the basic human rights that all other people, including other patients, enjoy. This is not solely a medical or scientific challenge. It is a moral challenge as well, as stated by Mr Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations Secretary-General.

The theme of this year's World Health Day, "universal access and human rights", was chosen to highlight the critical need to protect human rights and ensure access for all to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. In this context, the theme draws attention to the obligations of countries in this respect and raises many questions regarding the actions and measures that have been taken to prevent HIV.

"Everybody has the right to work, marry and have children, travel, to have shelter, to live in safety and in health" says Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. "Sadly, for people living with HIV this is often not the case. Too often they find themselves denied their rights and marginalized. The truth is that many of our societies have failed to address such breaches of the rights of people living with HIV. Every day we hear stories from around the world where HIV infection is the only reason given for denying them their rights."

The messages of World AIDS Day highlight some of the rights that must be safeguarded for people living with HIV, such as the right to confidentiality. According to Article 12 of the

Universal Declaration on Human Rights: “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation.”

Another basic human right is the right to treatment. This means comprehensive treatment, care and support, including access to antiretroviral therapy and other medicines, diagnostics and treatment for related opportunistic infections, the availability of good nutrition, and the provision of social, moral and psychological support. As stated in Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights: “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself, and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.”

Like all human beings, people living with HIV have the right to marry and have children. They should have access to counselling, to know that there are medicines that women living with HIV can take during pregnancy to prevent their children from contracting the infection. Health and legal systems must recognize the right of people living with HIV to have children, as stated in Article 16(1) of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights: “everyone has the right to marry and found a family.”

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