

Cairo, 23 May 2011—Results announced last week by the United States National Institutes of Health show that if an HIV-positive person adheres to an effective antiretroviral therapy regimen, the risk of transmitting the virus to an uninfected sexual partner can be reduced by 96%.

The trial, conducted by the HIV Prevention Trials Network, enrolled more than 1700 sero-discordant couples (one partner who is HIV-positive and one who is HIV-negative) from Africa, Asia, the United States and Latin America.

The availability of treatment for prevention will empower people not only to get tested for HIV, but also to disclose their HIV status, discuss HIV prevention options with their partners and access essential HIV services. It will also significantly contribute to reducing the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV

“Knowing ones HIV status is a prerequisite for access to HIV care and treatment and for prevention of onwards transmission of HIV. We need to focus our efforts to help people to know their HIV status through voluntary and confidential testing” said Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

It is currently estimated that fewer than 5% of people living with HIV in the Middle East and North Africa region know their HIV status. An increase in the availability and uptake of voluntary testing for HIV would have a significant impact on the AIDS response, particularly if more people gain access to treatment in light of the new findings.

However, getting an HIV test is not yet a viable option for most people at risk in the region. This is due to lack of risk awareness (or perceived susceptibility); limited access to confidential HIV testing services; and fear of stigmatization and discrimination in families and communities, at schools and in workplaces.

The policy of mandatory testing is widespread and demands huge investments in testing of low-risk populations while countries do not invest sufficiently in reaching populations at increased risk with voluntary confidential HIV testing services. Of the tens of millions of HIV

tests administered in the region since 1995, only about 3% were performed through voluntary HIV testing and counselling services.

In many countries, large numbers of migrant workers undergo mandatory HIV tests and the consequence of HIV- positive test results can be deportation or denial of visa. Counselling and referral to HIV care and treatment services is often not provided. This is a lost opportunity for prevention, treatment and care and fuels stigma and discrimination.

The fear of stigma and discrimination also appears to be a major obstacle to treatment access in all countries of the region. While all countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have established HIV treatment and care services and antiretroviral medicines are provided free of charge, most countries are still falling far short of the goal of universal access to treatment.

UNAIDS and WHO will work with countries and partners to increase access and uptake of HIV testing and counselling for individuals and couples as an entry point to HIV prevention and treatment.

“This breakthrough helps us to fulfil the commitments made in Dubai Consensus Statement on AIDS in June 2010. The policy-makers from the region can re-commit themselves during the upcoming High Level Meeting on AIDS in New York to an enabling environment which results in universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care,” said Ms Hind Khatib, Director of the UNAIDS Regional Support Team in Cairo.

Treatment for prevention is a window of opportunity that will help positive health, dignity and prevention to become a reality. UNAIDS, WHO and partners are determined to reach zero stigma and discrimination, zero new HIV infections and zero AIDS-related deaths in the region.

UNAIDS

UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, is an innovative United Nations partnership that leads and inspires the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Learn more at unaids.org.

WHO

WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. Learn more at who.int.

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