

Role of Education in Fighting AIDS

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Abstract

AIDS/HIV has become a threat to the society as an epidemic. Besides several factors responsible for its spread, ignorance about the causes and measures for its prevention is the biggest reason. World Health Organisation and the Government have also realised that ignorance of AIDS is the bane of society. Hence awareness, education programmes for the masses can liberate people from the ever spreading menace of AIDS. This paper focuses on the role of education in fighting AIDS.

KEYWORDS – AIDS, HIV, Education, World Health Organisation (WHO), STD, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Sex Trade, National Commission for Women, Morality

In recent years, whole universe has been entrapped by the menace of rapidly growing and fast spreading dreaded disease AIDS engulfing the metro towns and advanced societies in particular. AIDS has no barriers like race, creed, sex, region or culture. AIDS has spread relentlessly since its official debut in 1981 in America. Recent survey of WHO (World Health Organisation) suggests presense of alarming population of AIDS cases worldwide. These alarming reports reveal and Experts in India admit that the trends are indicative that India has the unfortunate distinction of being the HIV Capital of Asia¹.

There is no room for complacency as far as HIV/AIDS threat goes. Looking at the accelerated pace of the epidemic and its foreseeable fatal consequences world countries have been devoting all their energies day in and day out to find some effective measures for its prevention. There seems to be an unanimous resolve to educate the masses about AIDS, its symptoms and preventive measures against the transmission etc. AIDS being a communicable disease can be logically related with spurt in sexual relations attributable to T.V, obscene films, violence, use of intoxicants etc perverting the youth. Besides this, fast means of transportation have also contributed as carrier of the AIDS across the boundaries and barriers of state. Our ancient scriptures also have warned against the evils and ailments caused by promiscuity².

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) alluded it about 1400 years ago, when he said: “If promiscuity and adultery spreads in a community, then surely it will be followed by surge of a new epidemic, never known before”. This is a fact that AIDS is increasing with increase in sex and violence in the country.

AIDS has now become a global issue holding attention of the states activating them to make laws, regulations and policies for prevention of the awful disease. Some of the measures adopted to combat AIDS/HIV, may even debar a person from the consortium of others, require compulsory medical checkups, impose restrictions on entry to certain places, or may even necessitate other measures which militate against

individuals right to privacy or liberty. HIV infected persons right to equality, employment, housing, insurance cover, immigration and other welfare benefits vis-a-vis their obligations when they transmit HIV virus through sexual intercourse, blood donations or organ donations have assumed more importance in the existing situation. But deliberations legal complications arising in this embroglio are beyond the territory of this paper. This paper encompasses discussion on the measures to combat the epidemic of AIDS and role of education in fighting it out.

Though many devices have been evolved to overpower the explosive situation caused by the epidemic, but all prudent people admit that prevention is the best remedy then cure of the ailment. Mass media and Government's publicity division have now adopted a publicity campaign through different means so that masses are well informed about AIDS and its preventive measures. It has been noticed that several hoardings, posters, advertisements are serving little purpose and creating more complexities. Ignorance of correct and requisite basic information has generated a feeling of mutual mistrust, misconceptions, misapprehensions, suspicions and hatred towards HIV infected persons. Because of this hatred and discriminating treatment with the AIDS victims, they keep in low profile, conceal their infection and thus add to further spread and transmission of the disease. Had they been given consolatory treatment, they could be prompted to help in drive against prevention of infection³. Thus counselling can prove as a useful means against further spread of the disease. People must be educated about the different modes of transmission of HIV and diagnosis of AIDS/ HIV infections. If symptoms are detected at a primitive stage, people can guard against further spread of disease. Nextly, when some person is infected with HIV/AIDS there are numerous misconceptions about the viral transmission and he is treated as an untouchable in the society.

There is enough evidence to establish that lack of proper and full information of basic things about AIDS is the paramount factor responsible for large chunk of the agonies and miseries⁴. Hence the Government and health authorities must concentrate on education programmes on AIDS particularly for the vulnerable sections of the community. Various studies all-over the world have shown that the modes of transmission of this epidemic are limited to sexual intercourse with HIV infected people, exposure to HIV infected blood, transmission from an HIV infected woman to her foetus or infant or through HIV infected syringes. But most infections are acquired through Hetrosexual transmission⁵. Several hoardings and programmes displayed with an aim to educate people in India are themselves suffering with infirmities and they fail in giving healthy knowledge to the adolescents. These advertisements or programmes, particularly regarding use of condoms arouse anxiety among children about sex related problems and thus cause sexual perversion. Parents are often confronted with very perplexing questions put by their children but they are unable to reply satisfactorily in a moderately suitable manner. Thus it is most essential for teachers and parents to equip themselves to aptly respond to the queries of children and make them understand things in a comprehensive and impressive fashion so as to facilitate physical and emotional development of the children.

In our society, traditional norms and values of respect of elders are manifested in silence of children before elders which ultimately inhibits free and frank exchange of views between parents' and their wards. Somewhere, if there is openness in a family and wards are frank enough to express and share views with parents, parents are themselves not completely equipped with right information on such epidemic. Therefore they highly need, not only appropriate knowledge, but also skills and attitudes that permit effective communication, responsible decision making and development of healthy human relationship. It is a matter of fact that AIDS is more prevalent among the youth and they are the potent carriers of its virus because they are sexually more active, vital and adventurous to have premarital sex. Therefore adolescents must be the target group for educating and taming them about the sex behaviour and precautions against spread of AIDS /STD⁶. W.H.O. estimated in its report that more than two third of the population between age of 15 to19 years in developing countries has had atleast one sexual experience. Never mind that this is the age group most vulnerable to STD, with the W.H.O. estimating that 20-25 percent of HIV infections are likely to occur in the age group of 10-25 years . UNFP report also points out that some 15 million adolescent females become pregnant each year. In the light of above noted figures we can ponder as to the extent and number of adolescents indulging in sexual intercourse and thus causing spread of HIV/STD, hence dire need for educating them about AIDS and sex.

Although there has been a stiff opposition of sex education to children in schools from parents' side, various reviews of studies in US, Thailand and Mexico published by WHO global programme on AIDS, emphasize that sex education actually postpones the initiation of intercourse and promotes the effective use of contraception. It does not promote sexual experimentation or increase sexual activity.

Adolescents constitute about one third of the world population and in some developing countries more than half of the population is below 25 years of age. There are several societies where adolescents (15-19 years) have had sexual intercourse and atleast one fifth of the people with AIDS are in twenties. Since AIDS/HIV is incurable, prevention can be the only solution of malady, which is possible through education to adolescents and parents as well. Rapid changes in the society, disappearance of societal, cultural, ethnical, national barriers and pre dominant impact of mass media on youth have given many adolescents a wider range of behaviour including use of oral or injectable drugs as well as sexual misadventures in red light areas or elsewhere. They need to be educated about the potential consequences of such behaviour and to be helped to develop the skills and resources to avoid them. Education imparted to pupils in the school can have everlasting impression on the mind and behaviour of children in future. Since Red light areas are the main source of spread of the epidemic, sex workers also need to be educated, of course a fierce opposition may also come from the pimps and local mafia who control the business, flesh trade or sex trade. They fear that insistence on condom use would drive the customers away. This resistance may be overcome by taking the sex workers into confidence, educating them and thereafter sending them preventive measures against AIDS/HIV/STD as also the importance of periodic medical check ups⁷. The Government of India and National Commission for Women are fully cognisant of serious influence of trafficking on ever increasing rate of epidemic like HIV/AIDS. Therefore in a move Lalitha Kumarmanglam, Chairperson of NCW has also advocated

legalising sex work. There are an estimated 1.2 million children involved in prostitution in India. In the absence of legal protection, they lack access to medical facilities, which leaves them vulnerable to disease like HIV/AIDS, which further spreads to their clients as well. Bringing sex work above ground may have recourse against coercive pimps, traffickers or brothel owners, the government can reach to sex workers with medical aid and employment alternatives in case of need. Several countries like Germany and Holland have legalised sex work without adverse results. Thus legalising sex work may yield positive results instead of adding to the number of HIV/AIDS patients⁸. It is largely possible that any law enacted to legalise sex trade may invite a legal challenge also on the grounds of morality & decency. It is better to skip comments on the things lying in the womb.

A comprehensive programme on AIDS aiming at promoting the behaviour that prevents transmission of AIDS, eradication of discrimination against HIV infected people and curbs spread of the epidemic in the community can go a long way in combating the AIDS through prevention and dispelling the fears/ myths⁹. Awareness on AIDS/STD can be integrated with the Health education programme, social work programme, adult education programmes etc. Programme of education on AIDS must be strictly need based and formulated keeping in mind the knowledge, behaviour, conduct, capacity, age, culture and values of the Target group for whom the curriculum is framed. Curriculum must be designed and developed so as to make it acceptable culturally, ethnically and socially as also easily understandable. If need be community leaders can also be involved in this task, as their sermons may help to convince others who are reticent or unwilling. In Sydney, Australia the education authorities of Roman Catholic Church enunciated this policy:

“Just as Jesus broke through the social and cultural barriers of his time to reach out with compassion, love and hope to people in great need. Catholic educators are now called to respond in the same way to the crisis of AIDS, a new fatal disease. In their message to the Australian people (May 1987) the Catholic Bishops called for programs in schools to ensure that children are given accurate and appropriate information on AIDS, presented within a full Christian vision of human sexuality. Catholic parents and schools vision have a major role to play in the battle against ignorance and prejudice”¹⁰.

Curriculum of AIDS programme and subject matter connected therein must be examined periodically and recast accordingly to cater the contemporary requirements. People with special concern should also be involved in the process. HIV infected students and their parents can also be very useful in making the programme more comprehensive, effective as well as acceptable. Involvement of parents and community workers may increase the utility and success of programme manifold.

Object of school health education on AIDS must be to prevent and control the spread of AIDS/STD, make the youth understand about its allied problems and to counter the fear and discrimination against HIV infected people. Education of AIDS can be conveniently integrated with the existing subject areas that deal with the development of values, morals and personal skills. Besides classroom teaching, discussions and counselling sessions may be organised periodically and regularly in the school, where free and healthy interaction of youth with their teacher counsellor or programme

presenters may take place to get acquaintance much about the AIDS/STD and dispell the misconceptions, but then these teachers or counsellors will have to be properly trained and equipped with the right information pertaining to programme. Some written or audio-visual material may also be disseminated to the teachers for using as teaching tools. In addition to school teaching on AIDS, mass media can prove a very strong weapon to fight against this malady, provided the programmes shown on T.V. or broadcast on radio are thoroughly and closely examined in the light of tender minds whom it addresses. Time slots on T.V. for educating people about AIDS can be made very interesting , participative and meaningful by using music, art, drama etc which will leave indelible impressions on the mind. Though school education programmes and slots on T.V. are of optimum utility in fighting AIDS, but home is the place where children learn alphabets of life, social behaviour, attitudes, morality, ethics and so on. Parents are the first teacher of their offsprings, therefore much depends on How do they shape their children at this tender age when their whole nature is elastic¹¹. But one can give only those virtues and knowledge which he himself possesses. Hence parents must be fully conversant with the available detailed information about the dreaded disease and they must open channels for interaction with their wards without any inhibition or shyness, which normally obstructs free flow of knowledge to the children and thus results in transmission of misconceptions¹², fears and mistrust from unauthentic sources or substandard literature. To instill correct knowledge about HIV/AIDS/STD, parents themselves will have to be properly educated through relevant programmes. Many times students may be hesitant in asking the sex related questions to the parents, but may feel free with the school teachers. Sexual intercourse has been reported to be the topmost cause for HIV infection attributable mainly to promiscuity¹³. Hence need of awareness and education. Beside education and awareness there is a dire need of an exhaustive law also on the subject. Though Law alone may not be the panacea to combat AIDS/ HIV, still a lot of issues including Human Rights issues call for enactment of law on AIDS/HIV persons. It is extremely disappointing that the Bill drafted by the ministry has been shuttling between the Ministeries¹⁴.

A large number of factors are responsible for increasing rate of promiscuity in the present day society courtesy obscenity and nudity on mass media, drug addiction, immoral trafficking, child prostitution, lack of healthy sex education, lack of openness in domestic life and childhood borne shyness are the main factors responsible for inspiring children for sexual misadventures. Parents need to be educated about all these factors causing perverted sexual behaviour among children and its wayouts. Wise and educated parents can do a great service to the society by dampening the promiscuity through preaching ethics and morality of monogamy and celibacy as the only panacea for prevention of AIDS¹⁵. If celibacy becomes impracticable, only then the programmes must suggest contraceptives as safety measures against HIV infection/ STD. Thus education is a very strong weapon to curb the menace and dispell the varied misconceptions about AIDS and its allied problems¹⁶. We all must put our energies on concerted efforts to educate people about preventive and precautionary measures against the epidemic, but it may be recalled again that due care, caution, suitability and acceptibility of the programme must be the prime concern of planners and presenters.

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