

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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## NEWS

### AIDS in Asia

Recently the Asian Development Bank held a conference in Manila to discuss how AIDS will affect Asia and its economies. Since these problems may be quite relevant to India, we give a few highlights of this conference which dealt with some of the Asian countries.

The World Health Organization estimates that about 13 million people have become infected with HIV, the majority through heterosexual intercourse. AIDS is essentially a sexually transmitted disease. It can be transmitted by blood and perinatally. If the sexual transmission of HIV can be slowed down, AIDS pandemic can be curbed to a large extent. Today over two million HIV infected adults have developed AIDS and most of them are dying or dead. About one million children have been infected perinatally. More than eight million infections are in Sub Sahara Africa, 1.5 million in North America and Western Europe. Infections are on the rise in Latin America and the Caribbean (1.5 million). The steepest rise seems to be in Asia; given its population Asia's epidemic may ultimately dwarf those in all others. The major dilemma is how to obtain and provide the funds to care of the AIDS patients. The direct costs are not insignificant but are small compared to the indirect costs in the form of lost income and decreased work output, especially as millions in the most productive age group will fall sick and die. The Government of Thailand estimates that the direct and indirect costs to its exchequer may be 9 billion US dollars by 2000 AD. The estimate made at the conference is much higher – between 18 and 20 billion US dollars (about 25 per cent of the nation's GDP).

Thailand has the unfortunate combination of having a large number of intravenous drug users and one of the biggest sex industries in the world. The present estimate of 5000 HIV cases in the country is considered to be extremely low by the Thai Health Ministry. WHO feels that the number may be closer to 400,000 HIV infections in a total population of 50 million. The people of Thailand, however, do not consider AIDS as a major problem because very few have started dying of this disease. Many observers consider this as extremely unfortunate since they feel that the threat is very real. For example, in 1989 the number of cheap prostitutes who were HIV positive was 3.5 per cent. In three years it rose to 24 per cent! In the general population too the extent to which the virus has spread is indicated by the fact that 1 per cent of the pregnant women tested are HIV positive. Another study reported at the conference was that amongst the cheapest prostitutes, the infection rate was as high as 70 per cent. People are mobile and so also is the virus and it can spread wildly. One 'unofficial but reliable' estimate states that 100,000 Malaysian men go every year to Thailand for commercial sex. Even so in Malaysia the reported number of cases is said to be fewer than 3,000. Philippines again has a very large sex industry, yet only 400 cases of HIV infection have been discovered by the middle of this year. South Korea has come up with a low 500 reported cases. In a mandatory test of more than a million prostitutes only 25 cases of infection was found.

Are the threats exaggerated? For example, in certain African regions the disease for some unknown reason, has stabilized. In the UK and USA the

numbers predicted by experts, of infections and deaths, have proved to be too high.

These sad and what appear to be sordid details are given because all this may be quite relevant to India. At the conference it was stated that next to Thailand the country that will be most affected in Asia will be India. Numbers of between 400,000 and 500,000 HIV positive cases are being mentioned as being at present in India.

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*With the rapid urbanization taking place in India and with the large migration of male labour one wonders whether AIDS will pose a threat to the health and well being of our country. What is the strategy for collecting accurate statistics on AIDS in India? What are the steps to be taken to prevent its spread? Is AIDS likely to be a disease of the poor here (as it is in most Asian countries)? How are we to spread the knowledge on AIDS and educate the public? What are the medical facilities that are to be planned? Should medical and biochemical research on AIDS be funded in India in a big way? How will all this affect our economy which is opening up now? These are a few of the many problems we will be facing.*

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*In view of these problems we took a decision early this year that Current Science should bring out a special issue on AIDS. Prof. David Bloom, Head of the Department of Economics, Columbia University, New York has kindly agreed to be the guest editor and is at present working on this special issue.*

S. Ramaseshan