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NATIONAL AIDS STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Reports and Recommendations of the Sub-Committees of the National Strategy Committee on

- **Care and management of persons with HIV/AIDS**
- **HIV/AIDS surveillance (Interim Report)**
- **Education and prevention strategies**
- **Measures to avoid discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS**

ADOPTED BY THE MAIN COMMITTEE ON 13 APRIL 1992

NATIONAL AIDS STRATEGY

SUB-COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND PREVENTION

RECOMMENDATIONS

This sub-committee's remit was to examine the primary role of prevention and education as an integral part of an overall strategy to prevent the transmission of HIV and AIDS, and to make recommendations on future strategies in this area.

The objective of preventive measures is to limit the spread of HIV infection through public awareness campaigns, community-based prevention initiatives and improved infection control procedures. All these initiatives should raise awareness about the disease, how the infection is spread and how the risk of infection can be eliminated and reduced. In the absence of a cure for the disease or a vaccine against infection, preventive measures must remain at the forefront of government policy.

The committee recognised that knowledge of and instruction in safer sex and the wider availability and proper use of condoms has a major role to play in preventing the spread of AIDS. In general, the committee feels that there should be no restrictions imposed on outlets who wish to sell condoms. In particular, it is recommended that the legislation be amended, one to allow for sale of condoms from vending machines and two, to allow for distribution of free condoms by statutory and voluntary agencies involved in HIV prevention.

It also considered that whilst HIV preventive services such as methadone maintenance and needle exchange were extremely important strategies these were more appropriate topics for consideration by the Care and Management Sub-Committee. It therefore confined its work to education and information.

The committee reviewed the initiatives and interventions which have been implemented by both the voluntary and statutory sectors since the AIDS problem emerged and considered that the combination of both voluntary and statutory input constitutes the most effective framework for delivering education and information on HIV and AIDS to particular target groups. ***The committee recommends that this should continue and that co-ordination between both sectors will lead to more effective service delivery. In order that this liaison can continue***

effectively, the committee recommends that funds to the voluntary sector should be increased.

In carrying out its work, the committee took cognisance of the preventive strategies already undertaken and has based its conclusions and recommendations on the experience gained through the implementation of various preventive programmes to date, together with the latest information regarding the evolving epidemiology of the disease. In this context, the committee is of the view that preventive strategies should be targeted to meet the needs of particular groups as well as giving due recognition to the fact that it is individual behaviour that puts a person at risk.

The strategies reviewed by the committee were:-

- mass media initiatives;
- leaflet dissemination;
- targeted educational interventions;
- outreach initiatives;
- video manufacture and dissemination.

While all these approaches have a level of effectiveness, it is important that continuing research and evaluation are undertaken in order to assess the effectiveness of interventions.

The committee realises that the provision of information in and of itself will not prevent the spread of HIV, therefore it is important that dissemination of information is accompanied by a wide variety of other strategies which will help influence people's behaviour in such ways that the risk of further infection is greatly minimised.

In the light of this review and of the emerging epidemiology of the disease, the committee decided that the following groups should be targeted with specific interventions:-

[a] General Public
[b] Young People
[c] Young Emigrants
[d] Drug Users
[e] Homosexuals/men who have sex with men/Bisexuals
[f] Prostitutes

[g] Health Staffs

[h] Prisoners and Ex-Offenders

As a general principle, it was agreed that education and prevention work should not in any way contribute to prejudice and stigmatisation among those who are or may become HIV positive.

[A] General Public

It is recommended that the dissemination of the Health Promotion Unit's leaflet "AIDS — The Facts" should be continued.

It is also recommended that on-going, regular media campaigns be implemented on a national and local level emphasising different aspects of the problem from time to time as appropriate. It is recommended that a series of radio advertisements should be produced in time for Irish AIDS Day on the 16th of May and a bigger mass-media campaign be developed to coincide with World AIDS Day on December 1st.

Liaison should be built up between the regional health promotion officers, where they exist, and the local radio stations.

[B] Young People

To capitalise on the work already carried out with the Departments of Health and Education's AIDS resources materials for second-level schools (14-18 year olds), this committee recommends that the Department of Education in conjunction with the Department of Health should be responsible for developing appropriate materials accompanied by associated in-service which would target earlier years. ***It is recommended that early school leavers from post-primary schools should receive particular attention along with those from primary schools who are likely to drop out early.*** The committee recognises that the voluntary agencies have an important role to play as a resource in the formal and informal education sector.

[C] Young Emigrants

This committee recognises that the most effective means of reaching this group is through the production of an information leaflet which would be made available at

travel agents, student welfare offices, student medical centres, voluntary agencies, youth information offices as well as at all points of exit from the country. ***It is recommended that the Health Promotion Unit should be responsible for developing this leaflet in conjunction with relevant agencies.*** There should be on-going links with emigrant groups abroad to monitor and evaluate the situation.

[D] Drug Users

This committee recognises that intervention of an outreach nature based on one-to-one communication is the most effective method of reaching this group. It is also recognised that there is merit in providing guidance through outlets such as the AIDS Resource Centre in Baggot Street, community drug teams, proposed satellite HIV/Drug clinics and the voluntary sector, in conjunction with the current needle exchange and methadone maintenance programmes. Members of this target group should be consulted in the development of future informational materials. This will necessitate increased expenditure for the voluntary sector.

[E] Homosexuals/Men who have sex with men/Bisexuals

It is recognised that the criminalisation of homosexuality inhibits promotional work in this field.

This committee recommends that information and education should be provided by developing an Outreach programme. The committee recognised the need to develop an Outreach programme particularly in the major population centres. Safer sex messages need to be part of an on-going Outreach programme. Recent studies have found that a high proportion of gay men continue to be involved in at-risk behaviour. This will necessitate increased expenditure for the voluntary sector.

It is also recommended that funding for appropriate literature should continue to be made available to the relevant agencies.

[F] Prostitutes

The committee recognises that the most effective method of reaching this group is through an Outreach programme and recommends the establishment of same. ***It is recommended that members of this group should be consulted in the***

development of educational materials. This will necessitate increased expenditure for the voluntary sector.

[G] Health Staff

In-service and pre-service training initiatives are seen as being the most effective way of reaching health staffs. Core issues which need to be addressed include:

- The implementation of effective infection control procedures. To ensure this, hospitals and other health care providers need policy guidelines in this area e.g. in relation to needle stick injuries.

- The attitudes and behaviours to be adopted towards HIV positive people and people with AIDS.

General Training:

The committee recognises that the establishment of a specific HIV/AIDS training unit would constitute the provision of a very important service to meet training needs of many groups working in the HIV/AIDS field. The proposal to establish such a training unit should be structured in conjunction with workers already in the field.

[H] Prisoners and Ex-Offenders

The committee acknowledges that certain difficulties arise in this particular area and many of these issues come under the remit of the Anti-Discrimination Sub-Committee. In recognition of the fact that high risk behaviour occurs in prison, it is acknowledged that the dissemination of information reinforced by counselling is absolutely essential to prevent the spread of the virus within this environment.

To do this the committee recommends:-

(a) The establishment of an organisational structure in the form of a centralised committee that would allow for the dissemination of HIV/AIDS information accompanied by a one-to-one counselling service within the prison context.

(b) A process of desegregation should be initiated as soon as possible.

(c) A policy of confidential testing should be adopted.

Conclusion

Whilst the avoidance of at-risk behaviour is the surest way of minimising the possibility of infection, everyone involved in the implementation of preventive policies must recognise that large numbers of people will continue to behave in a way that exposes them to infection. It is therefore essential that much of the preventive effort is concentrated on making risk practices as safe as possible, as well as trying to change long-standing behaviour. By following these recommended interventions, all responsible agencies and individuals can build preventive programmes that can be adapted to meet changing needs. Only in this way can we be confident that the necessary steps are being taken to tackle what is a significant threat to public health both nationally and internationally.

It is recognised that a high level of priority attaches to all the recommendations made, but that variable periods of time will be required for the implementation of the recommendations. It would be useful therefore to divide the recommendations into those which can be addressed in the short term and those which require longer term planning and structural arrangements to be put in place.

In the short term it is recommended that the following be addressed:-

[1] A series of radio advertisements should be produced in time for Irish AIDS Day on May 16th and a bigger mass-media campaign be developed to coincide with World AIDS Day on December 1st.

[2] Liaison should be built up between the regional health promotion officers, where they exist, and the local radio stations.

[3] The legislation should be amended to allow for sale of condoms from vending machines and also to allow for free distribution of free condoms by statutory and voluntary agencies involved in HIV prevention.

[4] In-service and pre-service initiatives should be used in order to target health staffs.

[5] *Intervention of an Outreach nature based on one-to-one communication is the most effective method of reaching the drug using community.*

[6] (a) *An Outreach programme should be developed particularly in the major population centres in order to reach homosexuals/bisexuals/men who have sex with men.*

(b) *Funding for appropriate literature should continue to be made available to the relevant agencies in contact with the above group.*

[7] *Funds to the voluntary sector should be increased.*

[8] (a) *In order to reach prostitutes an Outreach programme should be established.*

(b) *Members of this group should be consulted in the development of educational materials.*

In the longer term it is recommended that the following on-going initiatives should be undertaken:

[1] *Co-ordination of input from the voluntary and statutory sectors should be continued.*

[2] *Preventive strategies should be targeted to meet the needs of particular groups as well as giving due recognition to the fact that it is individual behaviour that puts a person at risk.*

[3] *Continuing research and evaluation should be undertaken in order to assess the effectiveness of interventions.*

[4] *The dissemination of the Health Promotion Unit's leaflet "AIDS — The Facts" should be continued.*

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[5] *The Department of Education in conjunction with the Department of Health should be responsible for developing appropriate materials accompanied by associated in-service which would target earlier years.*

[6] *Early school leavers from post-primary schools should receive particular attention along with those from primary schools who may be likely to drop out early.*

[7] *An information leaflet should be developed by the Health Promotion Unit in conjunction with relevant agencies and should be made available at travel agents, student welfare offices, student medical centres, voluntary agencies, youth information offices, as well as at all points of exit from the country. There should be on-going links with emigrant groups abroad to monitor and evaluate the situation.*

[8] *The establishment of a specific HIV/AIDS training unit would constitute the provision of a very important service to meet the training needs of many groups working in the HIV/AIDS field.*

[9] *Dissemination of information reinforced by counselling is absolutely essential to prevent the spread of the AIDS virus within the prison system.*