

Prison reform to help control the spread of HIV

The World Health Organization (WHO) is recommending sweeping reforms in prisons in an effort to control the spread of AIDS. Guidelines prepared on the basis of a consultation organized by WHO recommend that condoms should be made available to prisoners if any possibility of sexual intercourse exists and that wherever prisoners inject drugs prison services should consider introducing needle-exchange programmes and providing bleach to clean injecting equipment, if such provisions are made for the community at large.

In all countries prisons represent a significant factor in the transmission of HIV because there is a higher rate among prisoners than among the general population. The consultation reviewed a survey of 55 prisons in 31 countries carried out by the University Institute of Legal Medicine in Geneva for the WHO Global Programme on AIDS. The survey disclosed that while information on HIV transmission is being provided to prisoners and prison staff in virtually all of the prison systems surveyed, a significant amount of transmission still occurs. Furthermore, the survey showed that prisons vary widely when it comes to backing up information with preventive measures such as the distribution of condoms.

The findings also revealed that most of the prisons surveyed have no effective measures for preventing HIV transmission through drug injecting. Nor do they have specific programmes for women prisoners even though their HIV rates are often higher than those of men.

To help prevent sexual transmission in prisons, the guidelines recommend that, as well as providing information, prison authorities or medical services should make condoms available to prisoners if any possibility of sexual contact exists. At the same time, aggressive sexual behaviour such as rape or the exploitation of vulnerable prisoners should be combated with adequate staffing, surveillance and disciplinary sanctions, as well as by providing education. The guidelines recommend that more attention should be given to prison health services in all of the systems studied.

To deal with the problem of HIV transmission through drug injecting the guidelines recommend that, in countries where bleach is available to injecting drug users in the community, the distribution of diluted bleach should be allowed in prisons housing injecting drug users. Also, where clean syringes and needles are available to drug injectors outside prisons, the authorities should consider supplying clean injecting material to inmates during detention.

On the question of HIV testing the guidelines stress that confidential voluntary testing, together with pre-test and post-test counselling, should be available when voluntary testing and counselling is available in the community. However, such testing should only be allowed with the informed consent of the prisoner. Compulsory testing would be unethical, ineffective and discriminatory.

World Health Organization, Geneva