

Armenia AIDS Threat Growing

A mobile population, drug use and low levels of public awareness feed HIV infection rates.

Varduhi found out she was HIV-positive in 2000, but since the subject is rarely if ever discussed in Armenia, only her closest relatives know.

Varduhi (not her real name), now 32, contracted HIV through sexual intercourse with her husband, who had been infected by a shared needle.

"We were living in Russia," recalled Varduhi. "My husband was an intravenous drug user. He was infected, and without knowing about it passed it on to me."

Their child is not HIV-positive.

Increasing numbers of people in Armenia are acquiring HIV, which can lead to AIDS. Experts attribute the rise to substantial population movement to and from Russia, where many Armenians go to work as labour migrants. A secondary factor in the spread of HIV is the low level of public awareness about prevention and treatment.

Varduhi, who is a housewife, does not look ill and the only sign she has HIV is the course of medication she takes on a rigid schedule.

"Some people are ignorant about how HIV can be transmitted, but they know it's an infectious disease that can't be cured," she said. "That's why when I tell them I am infected, they get scared and take care that we don't meet ever again after that. Many people are well aware of the means of transmission, but once they learn that [I am HIV-positive], they begin to avoid me.

"I want to tell my story openly to warn people that they should be more careful; to make them understand that HIV can happen not just to a drug-user

or a prostitute, but to an ordinary housewife like me as well."

Armenia's first case of HIV-infection was recorded in 1988. Since then, 528 people have been diagnosed with the condition, 99 of them this year, a record compared with previous years.

Samvel Grigorian, director of Armenia's Republican Centre for AIDS Prevention, said the figures should not be regarded as a sign of an epidemic. He said the rise in recorded cases was attributable to better diagnostic testing in Armenia, to the greater availability of HIV tests and centres where they can be carried out, and to increased public awareness about the virus.

"Over the past three years, the incidence of HIV among the most vulnerable population groups has gone down or remained stable," he said.

However, specialists estimate that there are around 3,000 HIV-positive people in Armenia who have never been tested for the infection and are unaware they have it.

The population as a whole remains very poorly informed about the issue of HIV/AIDS, and people who are HIV-positive are never seen or heard on television and radio.

In most Armenian families, parents prefer not to talk to their children about the issue. Schools have no specialist literature at their disposal and do not include discussion of HIV and AIDS in the curriculum. Only a handful of public organisations are vocal about it, but they work on a small scale and most young people are too ignorant and shy to discuss it.

Ara Babloyan, the head of the Armenian parliament's commission on health, environment and social issues, told IWPR that a programme is being drafted for the schools which will deal with health issues, with special attention to sexual health. But he could not put a date on when the programme would be

launched.

The most frequent recorded methods of HIV transmission are intravenous drug use and heterosexual intercourse, which account for around 49 and around 45 per cent of all cases, respectively. Just under half of the cases are in the capital Yerevan. Almost three-quarters of HIV-positive people are in the 20-29 age-group.

All those who have contracted the virus from shared syringes are male.

Rafael Ohanian, another member of the Republican Centre for AIDS Prevention, said cases of HIV acquired as a result of having multiple sexual partners were increasingly prevalent.

A public organization named Real World, Real People has brought together HIV-positive people and provides them with social and psychological support as well as legal assistance.

The group's co-chairman, Hovhannes Madoyan, said migration was the major original cause of HIV in Armenia.

"The main importers of HIV into Armenia are men who've gone to work in Russia and Ukraine," said Madoyan. "When they return home, they infect their wives. Of the 99 people recorded this year as carrying HIV, 57 got infected in Russia and Ukraine, and a further ten were their wives."

Elmira Bakhshinian, another specialist on HIV, says that within Armenia, deep-set prejudices and misconceptions make it easier for the virus to spread unchecked.

"Today there are a great many HIV-sufferers who got infected because they knew nothing about the ways the disease is transmitted. They thought it was a problem belonging to Africa or some other countries, and were sure it posed no danger whatsoever to themselves," said Bakhshinian. "As for our

women - in most cases they get infected because they don't have the right to tell their husbands to behave properly."

Armen (not his real name) is 38 years old. A former drug addict, he got the infection through needle-sharing and passed it on unwittingly to his wife.

"I learned that I had HIV in 2004," he said. "I am sure HIV is now spreading very rapidly in Armenia. The figures seem modest, but for a country with a small population they are quite high. I wish they would talk more about the problem to make young people take more precautions. It's very important to me, as I have a teenage daughter."

Armen says even the medical profession is prejudiced.

"The way doctors treat us makes us keep silent about our status," said Armen. "For example, when I went to the dentist, I used to tell them I was HIV-positive, but then they refused to treat me. Now I know better and I only tell them I have hepatitis-C and that they should sterilise their instruments thoroughly. Hepatitis is also incurable, but I mention it instead because it doesn't lead to the same kind of discrimination."

Armen's close friends and relatives know about his condition, but with others he is discreet, worrying that he will never find a job and that his family will face harassment if people find out.

"One of my friends died of the disease," he said. "His neighbours found out about it from a doctor who'd treated him, and began shunning his family members, avoiding him in the street or not saying hello. His family was forced to sell their flat and move to another area."

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Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

Focus: Caucasus

