HIV Infection Rates Rise in Armenia

Author: Yekaterina Poghosyan
Spread of virus linked to migrant population moving back and forth to Russia and Ukraine.

Like many of his compatriots, Hayk left the country to find work aboard, arriving in Russia in 2005.

He began working on building sites and sent money home to support his wife and children.

“It was hard work and I missed home. I worked all year and I was only able go home for New Year,” Hayk (not his real name) told IWPR.

Hayk, who is now 38, found out he was HIV-positive in 2006, after undergoing a test required by the Russian authorities for official registration as a migrant worker. His application was turned down, and he had to go back to Armenia. When he told his wife, she divorced him and took the children with her.

Hayk believes he contracted HIV from a girlfriend in Russia.

HIV remains rare in Armenia, but experts fear that growing infection rates could lead to a healthcare crisis.

Statistics on HIV infection rates in Armenia are limited. The Armenian government says a total of 1,586 cases have been recorded since records began in 1988, and 351 have since died.

This implies a total of around 1,200 current recorded cases. UNAIDS, the United Nations agency responsible for combating the virus, estimates that some 3,500 people are living with HIV in Armenia, including unrecorded cases.

The trend over recent years appears to be upwards. The government reported that the 228 cases diagnosed in 2012 were a record high. From January through November 2013, a comparable figure of 205 new cases was recorded.

“Comparing the 2012 figure with those for previous years, we can say with certainty that the epidemic is spreading in Armenia. At the start of the 2000s, there were no more than 30 recorded cases in Armenia,” Lena Nanushyan, UNAIDS coordinator in Armenia, told IWPR. “If you set these figures against those for countries like Ukraine or Russia, they look insignificant. But they are cause for concern, especially if you take into account the rise in infection.”

Janetta Petrosyan, the head of the health ministry’s AIDS Prevention Centre, told IWPR that 70 per cent of recorded cases involved men, reflecting the fact that they were more likely to travel out of the country.

“According to the 2012 data, 62 per cent of patients were infected abroad, and another 20 per cent were their partners. That means that migration played a role in more than 80 per cent of cases,” Petrosyan said.

According to figures from Russia’s Federal Migration Service, 125,000 Armenian nationals entered the country to work in 2011. The numbers heading there and to Ukraine continue to rise as the Armenian economy remains weak.

Experts say that this kind of population mobility can lead to more rapid and wide-ranging transmission than, say, the use of shared needles, which occurs within a narrower section of the community.

According to UNAIDS, 90 per cent of HIV cases diagnosed in Central Asia and Eastern Europe occur in Russia and Ukraine, with shared use of needles among drug users identified as the prime source of infection.

By contrast, data from Armenia’s AIDS Prevention Centre indicate that the main route of transmission in the country is heterosexual sex.

This is a major concern for women’s rights organisations, which say that in most cases where women have contracted HIV, it has been from husbands returning to Armenia after spells working abroad.

“Gender inequality is one of the main problems tied to ignorance about HIV,” Anush Poghosyan of the Women’s Resource Centre said. “In our society, it’s considered pretty much fine for the husband to be unfaithful when goes off to earn money in Russia or Ukraine. After some time, he [may] return infected with HIV, and will ignore his wife’s request to undergo a test, and pass it on.”

Anti-retroviral drug therapy for HIV has been available free of charge in Armenia since 2005. However, HIV/AIDS is widely seen as a taboo subject, and many carriers prefer not to tell medical professionals and
“People we work with often tell us that a dentist, for example, will refuse to treat someone when he finds out they are infected,” said Anush Arakelyan, spokeswoman for Real World, Real People, an organisation that helps HIV-positive people. “If you go to another dentist and don’t tell him… you will get treated. As a result of such cases, people are scared to talk about this.”

Hayk is among those who keep their status secret. He did not seek treatment for several years, as he was worried about what people would think of him.

“In Russia, you see posters warning you about AIDS every step of the way. HIV-positive people are accepted as more or less OK there – not like here,” he said. “People think they’ll get infected just from talking to you. That’s why I prefer to keep quiet about my disease. Only my parents know.”

**Yekaterina Poghosyan is a reporter for Mediamax in Armenia.**

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