

POSITION PAPER

**An Overview of the HIV/AIDS Situation and
the Programmes
on Its Prevention, Care and Control in Hong Kong**

May 1997

Introduction

1. AIDS was first diagnosed in Hong Kong in 1985. In the last 12 years, the epidemic has evolved both in its magnitude and its pattern. Despite the relatively low incidence of the infection in the local community, its impacts have been far-reaching. Over the years, we witnessed the development of a multitude of responses from the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the community - in preventing the spread of the infection, and in the care of those infected. The Advisory Council on AIDS has considered it timely to review our past for the purpose of carving out the future direction of the local programmes.

2. This paper begins with a brief account of local HIV/AIDS situation, followed by a summary of the current programmes provided by the Council, the Government and NGOs in Hong Kong. The purpose of furnishing this report is to create a platform to facilitate discussion on the subject.

Situation Review

3. As of the end of March 1997, a cumulative total of 821 cases of HIV infection have been reported to the Department of Health, 263 of whom have progressed to AIDS. A majority of the infection have been acquired through sexual contact, accounting for 88% of all reported cases with known route of transmission. The ratio of hetero- versus homo-sexual transmission is 2:1. Four babies contracted the virus perinatally from their infected mothers. Needle-sharing in injecting drug users remains an uncommon cause of HIV infection locally. There have so far been no reports of HIV infection through needlestick injury or/and mucosal contacts in the health care setting.

4. A scenario report was published in 1994 by analysing the reported statistics, and data from other forms of surveillance activities, including unlinked anonymous screening. It was estimated that about 3,000 persons have been infected with HIV in Hong Kong. Reviews made in 1995 and 1996 concluded that the estimate was likely to be too high. Currently it is believed that <0.1% (about 0.06%) of the adult population are infected.

5. Certain trends could be discerned in examining the data: (a) an increasing number acquiring the infection through heterosexual contact; (b) a sharper rise in AIDS incidence compared to that of HIV; (c) HIV positive pregnancies and babies are becoming more noticeable, though the absolute number is still very small; (d) a rising trend of STD (sexually transmitted diseases) in the last years.

AIDS Programmes Development and Layout

6. In Hong Kong, the first sign of an AIDS programme was the setting up of an expert committee in 1984. It was formed under the then Medical & Health Department, and with it, a Scientific Working Group on AIDS. In 1987, the Committee on Education & Publicity on AIDS and a Publicity Working Group were established. These committees were represented by government departments and had the input of community leaders and academics.

7. In 1990, the *Advisory Council on AIDS* was appointed by the Governor, which has since been headed by the Director of Health until the Council's reform in 1996. The Council is now chaired by a non-government official, with a majority of members appointed in their personal capacity except the: *Director of Health and the representatives of Health & Welfare Branch,*

Hospital Authority, Education Department and Social Welfare Department. The Council is underpinned by 3 committees: Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS, AIDS Services Development Committee and Scientific Committee on AIDS.

8. The Advisory Council on AIDS and the committees now meet on a quarterly basis. The terms of reference of the Council are: (a) to keep under review local and international trends and development relating to HIV infection and AIDS; (b) to advise Government on policy relating to the prevention, care and control of HIV infection and AIDS; and (c) to advise on the coordination of programmes on the prevention of HIV infection and provision of services to people with HIV/AIDS in Hong Kong.

9. The first *NGO* on AIDS was not formed until 1990. To date the following NGOs are working specifically on AIDS:- *AIDS Concern, Hong Kong AIDS Foundation, AIDS Memorial Quilt Project, AIDS Project of Hong Kong Council of Social Service, HIV Information and Drop-in Centre, Society for AIDS Care, and TeenAIDS.* *Action for Reach Out* also works on the subject through its focus on commercial sex workers

10. Apart from ‘AIDS-specific’ NGOs, other voluntary agencies are also involved in some parts of the AIDS programmes. Some examples are: *Caritas Hong Kong, Lions Clubs International District 303 Hong Kong and Macau, Family Planning Association, Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abuse* and its affiliated *Pui Hong Self-Help Association, Society for the Rehabilitation of Offenders,* and a number of homosexual groups. The AIDS Committee of Hong Kong Council of Social Service was set up in 1994 to coordinate efforts of NGOs under the Council.

11. On the Government side, the *AIDS Unit* of the Department of Health provides secretarial and operational support to the Advisory Council on AIDS. The Unit is also responsible for undertaking activities on AIDS surveillance, prevention, education, and provision of services to people living with HIV/AIDS. Other government departments and public bodies involved in the AIDS programmes are: *Hospital Authority, Education Department, Social Welfare Department, Health & Welfare Branch, and Correctional Services Department.*

12. The operation of government departments and the Hospital Authority are supported through the regular funding of the Government. There is, however, no “AIDS Budget” in Hong Kong. In 1993, an AIDS Trust Fund of 350M was set up by the Government to provide ex-gratia payment to HIV infected haemophilia patients. It has also become a major funding source of NGOs working on AIDS in Hong Kong. In addition, the office/service venue of some NGOs are provided by the Government

AIDS Prevention and Education

13. There are two major themes in Hong Kong's AIDS education programmes: (a) prevention of HIV infection and (b) care for those infected. Overall, a targeted approach has been adopted in the development of education activities for different community sectors in Hong Kong. The government and the community are working together in the provision of AIDS education.

14. The major forms of publicity are organized by the Government Information Service and Department of Health under the auspices of the *Task Force on Media and Publicity* of

Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS. Over 25 APIs (Announcement of Public Interest) have so far been produced and screened on local television. Other activities launched by the Government and NGOs have included:- exhibition, fun fairs, concerts, television series, distribution of publicity materials etc. The Department of Health holds quarterly press meeting to inform the public of the updated HIV/AIDS situation in Hong Kong.

15. Education for communities without higher risk of infection focuses on arousing awareness, and on fostering a non-discriminatory attitude towards those infected. These community sectors include schools, youth, women and workplace. The same themes are adopted by some AIDS-NGOs e.g. AIDS Foundation working on workplace and TeenAIDS on youth.

16. The *Youth Funding Scheme on AIDS* is one of the collaborative projects of the Government and the community, operative under the ***Task Force on Youth*** of the Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS. Started in 1991, the scheme has been providing funding and technical support to youth groups for undertaking education activities targeting young people in Hong Kong. Eighty-four projects have been supported under the scheme so far.

17. The ***Hong Kong Community Charter on AIDS*** is a joint programme of AIDS Unit and Lions Clubs International District 303 Hong Kong and Macau. Launched in 1994, the Charter has been promoting the adoption of a non-discriminatory policy and the conduction of AIDS education in the workplace. As of the end of March 1997, 78 organization /companies, including the Hong Kong Government, have joined as signatories.

18. Special programmes are organized by the Government and NGOs for people practising high risk behaviours. AIDS Unit works closely with the Correctional Services Department in developing on-going education for staff/clients, training programmes for staff, and policy for institutions. *Action for Reach Out* focuses on commercial sex workers. The ***Task Force on Drug and AIDS*** of Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS, in collaboration with Government and community groups, organizes outreach harm reduction and AIDS education for drug rehabilitation workers, rehabilitating drug users as well as street addicts.

19. Safer sex promotion is an imported component of AIDS education of the Government and NGOs. It is also emphasised by homosexual groups targeting those practicing high risk sexual behaviour. The *Social Hygiene Service (STD programme)* of the Department of Health works with AIDS Unit in safer sex education for STD patients. Condoms are regularly distributed free at the Department of Health's AIDS Unit, Social Hygiene Service and methadone clinic (20,000 distributed per month).

20. Risk reduction is part and parcel of the drug rehabilitation and education programme for drug users in Hong Kong. Apart from the extensive methadone network serving some 9,000 clients, residential type rehabilitation programmes is provided by the Government, the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers and a number of voluntary agencies, contributing to a multi-modality approach in Hong Kong. For ex-offenders, the Society for the Rehabilitation of Offenders is counselling those with a history of drug use through their aftercare services.

21. Since 1988, Hong Kong has been commemorating ***World AIDS Days*** by the launching of publicity and education activities on AIDS prevention and care on and around 1 December. These were organized by the Government and Committee on Education and Publicity on AIDS from 1988

to 1991. From 1992, the Government has been working together with NGOs on World AIDS Days with the coordinating effort of the Committee.

22. In the last couple of years, the Government has taken on a facilitating role in the development of Hong Kong's AIDS education programme. The **Red Ribbon Centre** began operation in December 1996 to facilitate the community to undertake AIDS education and research activities in Hong Kong. The Centre houses a resource library, a display area, an activity area and training facilities for the use of NGOs and the community.

AIDS Hotlines, Counselling and Services Provision

23. Telephone Hotline is an effective means of providing information and counselling to people at risk of infection and those infected. Launched in 1988, the Government's **AIDS Hotline** was computerized in 1993 with recorded message (Interactive Voice Response System - IVRS) now available in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. The service now receives 7,000-10,000 calls per month. About $\frac{1}{10}$ of the incoming calls are connected to nurse-counselors for follow-up. The AIDS Foundation and AIDS Concern also run telephone hotline services which are handled by volunteers and/or staff. In mid-1996, AIDS Unit and Hong Kong Sex Education Association jointly launched a *Dr. Sex Hotline* in an attempt to integrate AIDS education with that of sex and STDs.

24. Voluntary **HIV antibody testings** are available in the public service through the following channels: (a) in hospitals for patients with evidence of risk of infection; (b) all STD clinics; (c) TB clinics; (d) in hospitals for haemophilia patients; (e) drug rehabilitation services and (f) the Department of Health's AIDS Unit. The Department of Health's *Virus Unit* is Hong Kong's biggest HIV testing laboratory which handles about 3,500-4,000 tests per month. Free confirmatory tests are provided to other (including private) laboratories for samples which have been tested positive by a screening assay. On the non-governmental side, AIDS Foundation operates an HIV testing service with the laboratory support of the Virus Unit. Pre- and post test counselling are provided at AIDS Unit and AIDS Foundation.

25. Both AIDS Unit (DH) and Queen Elizabeth Hospital (HA) run a special **HIV clinical service** for people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. The same outpatient fee of HK\$44 is charged for entitled patients as in other specialist clinics in the public service. The services provide clinical follow-up, prophylaxis of opportunistic infection, antiretroviral treatment and treatment of complications. The services are staffed by doctors and nurses. A medical social worker from the Social Welfare Department provides support to Department of Health's HIV clinic. The participation of private doctor/clinic in HIV care is currently limited.

26. Under existing policy, HIV/AIDS patients may enter any hospital under Hospital Authority if hospitalization is required. A majority of the patients are however under care of Queen Elizabeth Hospital for historical reasons. The *Haven of Hope Hospital* (another HA hospital) has started admitting AIDS patients for **hospice care** since 1996. In March 1997, the *Society for AIDS Care* opened up an AIDS hospice in Tai Po.

27. **Support services** are provided by the NGOs as well as the government. The following are some examples. Medical Social Workers of Social Welfare Department offer their expertise to AIDS patients as and when necessary. Home-help service is available from some member

agencies of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service. AIDS Concern organizes a buddy service, transport service and soup delivery service. Self-help support services are also delivered by AIDS Foundation and the two HIV clinics in the public service. Society for AIDS Care organizes a home care service for people requiring its help.

Surveillance and Control

28. ***HIV surveillance*** is undertaken by AIDS Unit of Department of Health with the collaboration of clinical and laboratory services in the public sector, under the supervision of Advisory Council's Scientific Committee on AIDS. The surveillance system comprises:- (a) a voluntary reporting system; (b) surveillance of community groups including STD patients, drug users and blood donors and (c) unlinked anonymous screening. The system is supplemented by a behavioural surveillance programme currently under development.

29. ***Safeguarding blood and blood products*** is an important component of the local AIDS Control programme. The *Hong Kong Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service* has been screening each and every unit of donor blood for HIV since August 1985. From the same date, only heat-treated (or equivalent) blood products have been used for the treatment of haemophilia in Hong Kong. As of the end of 1996, 45 blood donors have been diagnosed with HIV, and their donated blood discarded accordingly. No case of HIV infection has been documented to be linked to blood/blood product transfusion ever since these measures were implemented over 10 years ago.

30. The *Scientific Committee on AIDS* has issued numerous ***professional guidelines*** on the prevention and management of HIV infection in the health care setting. To address the controversial issue of HIV infection in health care workers, Advisory Council on AIDS published its specific guidelines in 1994. An *expert panel* was set up by the Director of Health to advise on the management of such cases should they be diagnosed.

31. ***Infection Control*** is an important measure for preventing HIV infection in the health care setting. Infection Control Committees have been set up in health care institutions including those of Hospital Authority and the Department of Health. A *Task Force on Infection Control* has been set up within the Hospital Authority system. The Scientific Committee on AIDS works closely with infection control committees/team in the promulgation of its guidelines.

32. Advisory Council on AIDS is concerned with the training of health care worker on the prevention and management of HIV infection in health care setting. AIDS Unit regularly conducts courses for nurses in collaboration with School of Professional and Continuing Education, University of Hong Kong. It also provides support to undergraduate medical training in the two universities. A study was conducted by the Scientific Committee on AIDS in 1995 to examine the inadequacy in HIV training in Hong Kong.

Policy Formulation and the Legal Perspectives

33. As far as AIDS is concerned, Hong Kong did not start with a comprehensive set of policy to guide the development of its programmes. The government's strategy is, however, adopted in line with the recommendation of the World Health Organization and the international community.

34. In 1994, Advisory Council published its policy document *Strategies for AIDS prevention, care and control in Hong Kong*, outlining its recommended approach in dealing with the complex issue. The main objectives of Hong Kong AIDS programme are to prevent the infection and to reduce the negative impact of the disease on the individual and the society.

35. Incorporating the principles enshrined in the Council's policy document, the Government has formulated its policy in different community settings through its departments and branches, viz, Social Welfare Department, Education Department, Correctional Services Department, and Civil Service Branch.

36. There are no 'AIDS Laws' in Hong Kong. The rationale is, as far as possible, to incorporate the subject into other legal provisions important for the prevention, care and control of the disease in Hong Kong. The word 'AIDS' is only mentioned in (a) Undesirable Medical Advertisement Ordinance which prohibits the advertising of treatment of AIDS along with other diseases and (b) Disability Discrimination Ordinance, under which HIV/AIDS is one form of disability in respect of which discrimination is prohibited.

37. Other laws which indirectly have impacts on AIDS are (a) decriminalization of homosexuality in 1991, under the Crimes Ordinance; (b) Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance in which AIDS has not been included as one of the notifiable diseases; (c) Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance, under which condom standard is covered and (d) legislation governing control of drugs and rehabilitation of drug users.

38. To date, only very few cases relating to AIDS have been taken to court in Hong Kong. Some examples are (a) cases of those threatening to harm others with (suspected) HIV contaminated sharps; (b) applying for clemency in view of one's HIV status and (c) advertisement on AIDS treatment.

Research and Evaluation

39. To date, limited research has been conducted on AIDS in Hong Kong. The conclusion was reached following a survey conducted by Advisory Council on AIDS in 1995. Research activities have largely been focusing on (a) clinical observations; (b) epidemiological analysis and (c) awareness of the public and selected community sectors.

40. A KABP (knowledge, attitude, behaviour and practice) study was commissioned by Hong Kong AIDS Foundation, the report of which was published in 1996. In 1994, AIDS Unit collaborated with University of Hong Kong to construct an AIDS scenario for Hong Kong and to explore the feasibility of undertaking behavioural surveillance in the territory.

41. A number of studies have been undertaken by Advisory Council on AIDS and other groups to evaluate aspects of the local AIDS programme. They covered (a) service for people with HIV/AIDS; (b) effectiveness of television APIs and publicity campaign; (c) training of health care workers; (d) structure and operation of Advisory Council on AIDS; (e) the means in safeguarding blood products; (f) establishing guidelines for managing HIV-infected health care workers; (g) Tuberculosis and AIDS; (h) research on AIDS and (i) the role of NGOs.

Networking with the International Community

42. Hong Kong communicates with other countries in the region and elsewhere through the participation of conferences, visits, and training. The Department of Health works with the Western Pacific Regional Office of *World Health Organization* on the public health control of HIV/AIDS in Hong Kong.

43. In 1996, Hong Kong introduced two new initiatives to strengthen its linkage with its neighbours. In January, an AIDS HomePage was launched on Internet to inform others of Hong Kong's AIDS programme and situation. In November, the first ever Hong Kong AIDS Conference was held with the participation of workers from not just Hong Kong, but China and Macau.

44. Over the years, local AIDS programme staff and NGOs have worked closely with counterparts in China for information exchange, sharing of experience and in training activities. In late 1996, a Hong Kong-China AIDS Committee was set up by the Hong Kong AIDS Foundation and the Chinese Association of STD & AIDS Prevention and Control to strengthen the ties between the two places.

Conclusion and the Way Ahead

45. In Hong Kong, the AIDS programmes is characterized by an initiation of the Government and extensive community participation. The Government programme features targeted prevention activities while patient services are being integrated into existing health and welfare framework. The Government's work is supplemented and complemented by designated programmes of NGOs in the community.

46. In deciding on the directions of the future programmes, the following concerns have been raised by ACA and its committees:- (a) the appropriate strategy of sustaining the effort in a low prevalence country area; (b) development of integrated Vs designated programmes; (c) formulation of programme targets; (d) need for modifying the existing programme structure, (e) the role and operation of the Advisory Council on AIDS, and (f) cost effectiveness.

47. As Hong Kong is returning to China in July 1997, it is also necessary to reexamine the relationship between two places as regards AIDS prevention, care and control.

Appendix

Highlights and Important Events on AIDS in Hong Kong 1984 - 1996

- 1984 - An expert committee on AIDS and a Scientific Working Group were set up by the Medical & Health Department.
- 1985 - The first case of AIDS was reported.
 - An HIV/AIDS surveillance system was established.
 - Hong Kong Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service began screening of donors, safer heat-treated blood products were procured by the Government.
 - An AIDS counselling service was established by the Government.
- 1987 - The Committee on Education & Publicity on AIDS was formed, and the first API (announcement of public interest) was screened on local television.
 - Zidovudine, the first anti-HIV drug, was introduced.
- 1988 - an AIDS hotline (27802211) was introduced by the Government.
 - The first World AIDS Day was commemorated.
- 1989 - Free confirmatory tests were provided by the Government to other laboratories for preliminary positive HIV test results.
- 1990 - Advisory Council on AIDS was set up.
 - Unlinked anonymous screening was introduced.
 - AIDS Concern, an NGO working on AIDS, was set up.
- 1991 - Another NGO, AIDS Foundation was established.
 - Homosexuality was decriminalized.
 - A Youth Funding Scheme on AIDS was introduced by the Committee on Education & Publicity on AIDS.
- 1992 - An HIV infected dentist disclosed his HIV status to the public. A special working group was formed by the Advisory Council on AIDS to establish guidelines for preventing HIV infection in health care settings.
 - A school boy with HIV/haemophilia was rejected by the school authority.
- 1993 - Legislative Council held on adjournment debate on AIDS.
 - AIDS Trust Fund was set up.
 - Advisory Council on AIDS was reappointed, and with it, three committees: Scientific Committee on AIDS, AIDS Service Development Committee and Committee on Education & Publicity on AIDS.
 - The Government's AIDS hotline became computerized.
- 1994 - Advisory Council on AIDS published its policy "Strategies for AIDS Prevention, Care & Control in Hong Kong".

- The Hong Kong Community Charter on AIDS was launched, with the Government becoming one of the first signatories.
- 1995
- The Disability Discrimination Ordinance was passed by the Legislative Council. HIV/AIDS is one form of disability under the Ordinance.
 - The first case of HIV-2 was reported.
- 1996
- Advisory Council on AIDS was restructured and is now chaired by a non-government official.
 - The first Hong Kong AIDS Conference was held.
 - Red Ribbon Centre became operative in phases, with the mission of facilitating conduction of AIDS education and research in the community.