15th international AIDS conference, Bangkok

Thailand ignores HIV epidemic in drug users

Robert Walgate *Bangkok*

The opening of the 2004 international AIDS meeting in Bangkok, with its elephants, Thai dancers, and loud drumming, was intended to be a fanfare for Thailand's new commitment to treat 100% of its citizens who had AIDS with regionally produced generic antiretroviral drugs. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra even announced that Thailand would help neighbouring countries to treat their own cases.

But, although his promise delighted some, not everyone shared his optimism. Thailand has dramatically reduced the levels of HIV infection among sex workers and reduced men's use of brothels (where some fathers would initiate their sons to sex), but it has neglected substantial HIV transmission among and from injecting drug users.

Also, Mr Shinawatra did not announce any provision to

increase the number of doctors trained to monitor and treat HIV/AIDS. Thailand has only one trained doctor for every 6700 people infected with HIV, says Treat Asia, a programme of the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

Paisan Swannawong, director of the Thai Drug Users Network, was in tears during his speech, the last of the ceremony, for which most delegates did not stay.

"In a recent war on drugs in Thailand, over 2500 people were killed extra-judicially in the first three months of the campaign... [Injecting drug users] are the only group in Thailand whose 50% [HIV] prevalence has not changed in 15 years," claimed Mr Swannawong.

Harm reduction—the provision of clean needles and other support—is the approach by UNAIDS [the joint United Nations programme on HIV

and AIDS] to HIV transmission among injecting drug users, but that has not been Mr Shinawatra's method until now.

Mr Shinawatra announced the creation of a harm reduction programme, with help from the United Nations and non-governmental organisations. But, said Mr Swannawong, "although the government says its current policy is to treat drug users as patients, not criminals... we continue to be arrested and offered the choice of prison or military-run rehabilitation centres. Is this harm reduction or harm production?"

Kevin Frost, director of Treat Asia, told the *BMJ* that his concern was proper care for HIV patients who are taking antiretroviral drugs.

It would be hard to make a dent in a figure of 6700 HIV positive people per trained doctor, he admitted, but "even family members can be trained

Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra opens the conference in Bangkok

as 'buddies' in treatment programmes to help ensure compliance and making sure patients take their drugs regularly and on time." □

Education programme reduces STDs in African-American girls

Susan Mayor *Bangkok*

Education programmes designed to promote self esteem in African-American teenage girls improved their behaviour towards avoiding HIV infection and showed some reduction in sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), a study has shown (*JAMA* 2004;292:171-9).

The study randomised 522 sexually experienced African-American girls aged 14 to 18 years to two groups. The intervention group (n=251) attended sessions designed to promote self esteem, as well as providing information about HIV, skills in communication, condom use, and

how to have healthy relationships.

The first session focused on promoting ethnic and gender pride, without even mentioning HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, or sex. The slogan for the programme was: "Be safe for yourself, your family, and your community." The comparison group (n=271) was given information on exercise and nutrition. All participants received four group training sessions each lasting four hours.

Reporting the findings at a briefing during the AIDS conference this week, Ralph DiClemente, professor of public

health at the Rollins School of Public Health and Center for AIDS Research, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, warned: "Adolescents are rapidly emerging as a population at high risk of HIV infection. African-American teenage girls are a subgroup at particularly high risk, but previous interventions designed for this population have failed to reduce behaviours associated with HIV risk. We wanted to instil a sense of pride in the teenagers attending—let them know that they are important."

Results at six months showed that the girls attending the HIV education programme showed higher self reported consistent use of condoms—that is, using a condom during every episode of vaginal intercourse—in the previous 30 days than the comparison group (75% v 58%). A

greater proportion also reported consistent use after 12 months' follow up (73% v 57%).

Consistent condom use was also higher over the entire 12 month period (adjusted odds ratio, 2.01; 95% confidence interval 1.28 to 3.17; P=0.003). Professor DiClemente added: "Participants in the HIV intervention were also more likely to report using a condom the last time they had vaginal sexual intercourse."

Girls attending the HIV education programme showed a trend to reduced self reported pregnancy (3.6% v 7.0% at six months; P=0.04) and laboratory confirmed chlamydia. □

Competing interests: Roche paid for flights and accommodation for Susan Mayor to attend the AIDS conference.