Social Rehabilitation of HIV/AIDS Orphans

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Introduction

The trauma of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is now quite palpable. More men have been killed by AIDS than the total casualties of both the world wars taken together. By the end of the 20th century, well over ten million children have been rendered orphans by this disease.

The problems faced by the orphans suffering from human immunodeficiency virus infection (HIV) and AIDS are not only of medical nature but also have associated social and emotional aspects that demand compelling attention and appropriate intervention. The non-acceptance and social discrimination of such children requires a compaction of medical, social, educational and emotional rehabilitation. These children need love and affection so that they could live quality life free from the fear of foreseen.

Case Report

Shyam and Shweta, 7 and 9 years of age respectively, both HIV positive, are children of Smt and Shri Vaman Bhosale who breathed their last due to AIDS recently. These orphans were left under the care of Mrs Meera Shinde, their maternal aunt who was working as a maidservant at the house of a dental surgeon (all names changed).

The wife of the dental surgeon provided emotional and material support and took the children to the medico-social unit of Department of Community Medicine, Armed Forces Medical College (AFMC) seeking their rehabilitation. The medico-social team planned the rehabilitative process and the children were first taken to Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centre (VCTC) at AFMC for HIV testing. The team then approached the grandmother of the children who suggested that the children should be rehabilitated at an institute, as she was not in a position to take proper care of the children for life.

The team then approached "Manavya" a non governmental organisation (NGO), which has dedicated itself

to the residential care of such unfortunate children. It provides medical, emotional, nutritional and educational support to such children. Mrs. Vijayatai Lawate, the founder of this NGO advised that the children be first taken to Juvenile Court so that they are Court-Committed, following which the children may be sent to 'Manavya- Home' for further rehabilitation. Court commitment of children becomes mandatory as it enables the NGOs to claim monetary grant from state government.

The required documents consisting of, death certificate of both the parents, HIV status certificate of the children, application from close relatives on court paper requesting for rehabilitation and ration card were arranged and the team produced the children before the Juvenile Court where the honourable judge interacted with the children and their grandmother. After convincing himself that the grandmother could not take care of her grandchildren, the orphans were directed by the court to be kept at respective Observation Homes, under the provisions of Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000, (56 of 2000) [1] and Maharashtra Juvenile Court (Care and Protection of Children) Rule 2002 [2].

Under the above mentioned Act and Rules, any child who is in need of care and protection is kept for six months at Observation Home, and placed under 'Child Guidance Clinic' [3] where children are given elementary education, taught various arts and craft and participate in games/ recreational activities. In due course of time, parents, if alive, are traced and counselled so that the children could be handed over to their parents.

Here was a peculiar situation – where children were cases of HIV/AIDS and the parents had expired. Such children would not only be discriminated against but are also likely to experience social problems like isolation, stigmatisation, denial of education and social integration. Lack of love, care, affection, loss of self-esteem and social rejection hold the distinct threat of driving the children into a vortex of emotional turmoil and distress [4].

An appeal was therefore made to the juvenile court to

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reconsider their decision so that the orphaned children could be sent directly to 'Manavya' by waiving the requirement of admission to Observation Homes. The court appreciated the social issues raised by the team and ordered them to be taken under care of 'Manavya' and granted monthly monetary grant of Rs 500 per child.

The children, at present are under care at 'Manavya' where 45 HIV/AIDS orphan children stay and learn together. They share love and fellow- feeling. 'Manavya' provides them nursing care and medication. A paediatrician and gynaecologist visits 'Manavya' once a week and extend specialist care to the needy. The aim of 'Manavya' is to nurse HIV/AIDS positive children to live with dignity as long as they survive.

Discussion

The term rehabilitation means 'the combined and coordinated use of medical, social, educational and vocational measures for training and retraining the individual to the highest possible level of functional ability' [5]. However, in context of children suffering from HIV/AIDS, the rehabilitation process involves more of social and emotional commitment so as to overcome the social disadvantage, such as hostile family environment, lack of vocational and social skills, social stigma, homelessness and no sense of belonging [6].

Shyam and Shweta, the unfortunate orphan children of deceased parents afflicted with AIDS required medical and social rehabilitation, for which Department of Community Medicine (PSM), AFMC was contacted. It not only gave them an opportunity to tackle this emerging social problem but also allowed the members of the Prayas Club, a social and welfare club of medical cadets of the college, to deal with the challenges, which lie ahead in times to come. Members of the Prayas Club accompanied the rehabilitation team and provided material and financial support to the children.

This case report has been made primarily to sensitise the caring professionals to an emerging social issue that

they might confront more often, and to make the medical professionals and counsellors working in the armed forces, conversant with the procedures and provisions of law.

The rehabilitative process of HIV/AIDS orphans is likely to become a national challenge and will require collaborative efforts from various social, governmental and non-governmental organisations to provide them humanitarian care so as to enable them to spend their life with dignity in a caring environment.

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Conflicts of Interest

None identified

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