A SURVEY OF ATTITUDES OF NAVAL PERSONNEL TO RETENTION OF HIV POSITIVE SAILOR ON SHIP AND IN NAVAL SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

A survey of attitudes of naval personnel to retention of a HIV Positive Sailor on a ship and in naval service was carried out among personnel posted to ships/establishments at Visakhapatnam. A total of 652 naval personnel were subjected to the questionnaire. The study revealed that only 234 (35.9%) of the individuals indicated willingness for retention of an HIV Positive Sailor on their ship, while 390 (59.8%) did not want retention of such an individual on their ship. A majority of these 390 individuals however could not forward any justifiable reason for their opinion. Retention in naval service of an HIV Positive sailor was recommended by 389 (59.7%) of the individuals surveyed while 251 (38.5%) individuals did not favour such an action. Unjustified reasons were ascribed by a majority of personnel not favouring retention in service. Almost 75% of officers expressed positive attitude for retention of HIV personnel on the ship as well as in service. Only 29% of sailors expressed positive attitude for acceptance on ship while 57% of them expressed positive attitude for retention in service.

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KEY WORDS: Attitudes; HIV; Sailors.

Introduction

AIDS is spreading in a pandemic form since its initial diagnosis in 1981. The first HIV Positive individual was detected in India in 1986 and the first AIDS case occurred in May 1987. In a survey conducted by "AIDS in the World" in 1992, the vulnerability of Indian Society is ranked as high [1].

With introduction of screening facilities in Armed Forces Hospitals, cases of HIV Positive individuals started being reported among naval personnel. Unfortunately the virus has been known to affect individuals at the peak of their productive adult life. AIDS provokes raw emotions and moralism due to sexual indiscretions being the main cause of transmission of the disease. This breeds prejudice towards the unfortunate victim [2,3]. As there is potentially long preclinical period since detection of HIV Positive status of an individual and development of AIDS, the existing policy in the Armed Forces is to retain such HIV Positive individuals in service till they develop AIDS Related Complex (ARC) or full blown AIDS, when they are invalided out of service. HIV testing is also voluntary in contrast to the US Armed Forces where it is compulsory [4]. Strict confidentiality of the information regarding the HIV Positive status of the individual is maintained.

However, administrators in naval ships and estab-

lishments have been privately against retention of HIV Positive individuals on ships and even in shore establishments on grounds of doubtful blood safety measures in close confines of ships and poor morale of such individuals making them undesirable sailors even in shore establishments. Due to continuous increase in numbers of HIV Positive individuals a study was planned to assess the unbiased opinions of a cross-section of naval personnel at Visakhapatnam.

Material and Methods

The study was carried out in few ships and establishments of Indian Navy at Visakhapatnam. Personnel were selected randomly from among ships/establishments at Visakhapatnam and were administered a questionnaire during the study using a pre-tested proforma. Approximately 50 personnel each from ships/submarines were included in the study. 5 Officers, 20 Senior Sailors and 25 Junior Sailors from each ship/submarine were selected randomly from those present on the date of survey. However an attempt was made to include all branches of the sailors. In shore establishments approximately 100 personnel were similarly selected as in the case of ships/submarines. The survey was carried out between Jul 94 and Aug 94.

The following definitions were used during the survey:-

Justified Reason for Retention- Reasons ascribed for retention of a hypothetical HIV Positive individual were considered justified if these conformed to accepted norms and the individual had correctly anticipated the risk posed by such an individual in transmitting the virus to his colleagues.

Unjustified Reason for Retention- Reasons ascribed for retention of a hypothetical HIV Positive individual were considered

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unjustified if these did not conform to present understanding of the virus and its potential threat to his colleagues.

Misconception- An individual was considered to have a misconception if he had ascribed route of transmission of HIV by any means other than those presently accepted based on existing scientific knowledge of the virus.

All selected personnel of a ship/establishment were simultaneously asked to fill up a questionnaire. In case an individual due to illiteracy could not complete the questionnaire, the same was filled up by a member of the survey team based on answers provided by the individual. At no stage was an attempt made to hint at possible answer(s). The questionnaire attempted to obtain information regarding the background about the respondent, his knowledge about transmission of HIV, knowledge about HIV Positive individuals on his ship and his views about retention of a hypothetical HIV positive individual on ship and in service.

Results

A total of 652 Naval personnel were administered the pre-tested questionnaire during the survey and consisted of 98 Officers, 248 Senior Sailors and 306 Junior Sailors. 234 (35.9%) individuals indicated willingness for retaining a hypothetical HIV Positive individual on their ship while 390 (59.8%) did not favour such retention; 28 (4.3%) did not express any opinion. The distribution of the personnel indicating their opinion regarding retention

of a HIV Positive individual on ship as per the category of their ship, their rank and presence of misconception regarding transmission of the virus is indicated in Tables 1, 2 & 3. There was no significant difference in opinions expressed by personnel posted to ships or to submarines as compared to those posted to shore establishments, ($p>0.5$) (Table-1). No significant difference was also found in opinions expressed by personnel of different ranks, ($p>0.05$) (Table-2). There was however a significant difference in those not recommending retention of HIV Positive individuals on their ships if harbouring misconceptions of the disease as compared to those not harbouring such misconceptions, ($p<0.05$) (Table-3). A majority of people could not forward justifiable reason for their opinion. Retention of a HIV Positive individual in Naval Service was favoured by 389 (59.7%) individuals as compared to 251 (38.5%) who did not favour their retention; 12(1.8%) did not express any opinion.

The distribution of the personnel indicating their opinion regarding retention of a HIV Positive individual in service as per the category of their ship, their rank and presence of misconception regarding transmission of the virus is indicated in Table 4, 5 & 6. There was no significant difference in opinions expressed by persons posted to different category of ships, ($p>0.05$) (Table-4). A large percentage of officers recommended retention of a HIV Positive person in service as compared to sailors (Table-5). There was a statistically significant difference in the opinions expressed by officers as compared to that of personnel below officer rank,

TABLE 1

Opinion regarding retention on ship of an HIV positive person linked to shore establishment or afloat establishment

Category of ship	Retention On Ship						Undecided	Total
	Yes			No				
	Justified Reason	Unjustified Reason	Total	Justified Reason	Unjustified Reason	Total		
Shore Establishment	84 (21.1)	70 (17.5)	154 (38.6)	8 (2.0)	223 (55.9)	231 (57.9)	14 (3.5)	399 (100)
Afloat Establishment (Surface Craft)	31 (18.7)	26 (15.6)	57 (34.3)	1 (0.6)	102 (61.5)	103 (62.1)	6 (3.6)	166 (100)
Afloat Establishment (Submarine)	14 (16.1)	9 (10.3)	23 (26.4)	0 (0)	56 (64.4)	56 (64.4)	8 (9.2)	87 (100)
Total	129 (19.8)	105 (16.1)	234 (35.9)	9 (1.4)	381 (58.4)	390 (59.8)	28 (4.3)	652 (100)

Statistical significance - Shore Establishment : Others (Total Yes : Total No)
Chi square - 2.41; df = 1; $p > 0.05$; Figures in the parenthesis show percentage

TABLE 2

Opinion regarding retention on ship of an HIV positive person linked to rank

Rank	Retention On Ship						Undecided	Total
	Yes			No				
	Justified	Unjustified	Total	Justified	Unjustified	Total		
Officer	37 (37.8)	35 (35.7)	72 (73.5)	2 (2.0)	23 (23.5)	25 (25.5)	1 (1.0)	98 (100)
Senior sailor	39 (15.7)	33 (13.3)	72 (29.0)	5 (2.0)	170 (68.6)	175 (70.6)	1 (0.4)	248 (100)
Junior sailor	53 (17.3)	37 (12.1)	90 (29.4)	2 (0.7)	188 (61.4)	190 (62.1)	26 (8.5)	306 (100)
Total	129 (19.8)	105 (16.1)	234 (35.9)	9 (1.4)	381 (58.4)	390 (59.8)	28 (4.3)	652 (100)

Statistical significance - Officer : Others (Total Yes : Total No); Chi square - 64.26; df = 1; $p < 0.05$
Statistical significance - rankwise (Total Yes : Total No); Chi square - 66.6; df = 2; $p < 0.05$
Figures in the parenthesis show percentage

TABLE 3

Opinion regarding retention on ship of an HIV positive person linked to misconception regarding transmission

Misconception	Retention on ship						Undecided	Total
	Yes			No				
	Justified	Unjustified	Total	Justified	Unjustified	Total		
Present	48 (11.8)	70 (17.3)	118 (29.1)	1 (0.3)	267 (65.9)	268 (66.2)	19 (4.7)	405 (100)
Absent	81 (32.8)	35 (14.2)	116 (47.0)	8 (3.2)	114 (46.2)	122 (49.4)	9 (3.6)	247 (100)
Total	129 (19.8)	105 (16.1)	234 (35.9)	9 (1.4)	381 (58.4)	390 (59.8)	28 (4.3)	652 (100)

Statistical significance - Misconception Present : Absent (Total Yes : Total No)

Chi square - 19.97; df = 1; $p < 0.05$;

Figures in the parenthesis show percentage

TABLE 4

Opinion regarding retention in service of an HIV positive person linked to shore establishment or afloat establishment

Category of ship	Retention on ship						Undecided	Total
	Yes			No				
	Justified	Unjustified	Total	Justified	Unjustified	Total		
Shore Establishment	64 (16.0)	174 (43.6)	238 (59.6)	4 (1)	154 (38.6)	158 (39.6)	3 (0.8)	399 (100)
Afloat Establishment (Surface Craft)	23 (13.8)	74 (44.6)	97 (58.4)	3 (1.8)	61 (36.8)	64 (38.6)	5 (3.0)	166 (100)
Afloat Establishment (Submarine)	22 (25.3)	32 (36.8)	54 (62.1)	1 (1.1)	28 (32.2)	29 (33.3)	4 (4.6)	87 (100)
Total	109 (19.8)	280 (16.1)	389 (35.9)	8 (1.4)	243 (58.4)	251 (59.8)	12 (4.3)	652 (100)

Statistical significance - Shore Establishment : Others (Total Yes : Total No)

Chi square - 0.13; df = 1; $p > 0.05$

Figures in the parenthesis show percentage

TABLE 5

Opinion regarding retention in service of an HIV positive person linked to rank

Rank	Retention on ship						Undecided	Total
	Yes			No				
	Justified	Unjustified	Total	Justified	Unjustified	Total		
Officer	37 (37.8)	36 (36.7)	73 (74.5)	0 (0)	24 (24.5)	24 (24.5)	1 (1.0)	98 (100)
Senior sailor	34 (13.7)	103 (41.5)	137 (55.2)	7 (2.8)	103 (41.6)	110 (44.4)	1 (0.4)	248 (100)
Junior sailor	38 (12.4)	141 (46.1)	179 (58.5)	1 (0.3)	116 (37.9)	117 (38.2)	10 (3.3)	306 (100)
Total	109 (16.8)	280 (42.9)	389 (59.7)	8 (1.2)	243 (37.3)	251 (38.5)	12 (1.8)	652 (100)

Statistical significance - Officer : Others (Total Yes : Total No); Chi square - 9.35; df = 1; $p < 0.05$ Statistical significance - rankwise (Total Yes : Total No); Chi square - 11.47; df = 2; $p < 0.05$;

Figures in the parenthesis show percentage

($p < 0.05$). There was a significant difference in the opinions expressed by personnel having some misconceptions about transmission of the disease as compared to those without any such misconceptions ($p < 0.05$) (Table-6). A majority of personnel who expressed their opinion regarding retention of HIV Positive individual in service did not give any justifiable reason for their opinion. Compassionate ground was commonly cited as reason for retention, while poor utility of the sailor and likely trouble creating habit of these personnel were quoted as reasons for non retention in service. The findings (other than those indicated in the tables)

revealed no differences statistically between opinions of personnel belonging to different branches or ages.

Discussion

HIV Positive individuals are vulnerable to prejudice and high risk of losing jobs, education, housing and insurance [5]. Although Armed Forces have till date adopted the universal line of thinking that HIV Positive individuals must not be deprived of their liveli-

TABLE 6

Opinion regarding retention in service of an HIV positive person linked to misconception regarding transmission

Misconception	Retention on ship						Undecided	Total
	Yes			No				
	Justified	Unjustified	Total	Justified	Unjustified	Total		
Present	47 (11.6)	175 (43.2)	222 (54.8)	52 (12.8)	123 (30.4)	175 (43.2)	8 (2.0)	405 (100)
Absent	62 (25.1)	105 (42.5)	167 (67.6)	52 (21.1)	24 (9.7)	76 (30.8)	4 (1.6)	247 (100)
Total	109 (16.7)	280 (43.0)	389 (59.7)	104 (16.0)	147 (22.5)	251 (38.5)	12 (1.8)	652 (100)

Statistical significance - Misconception Present : Absent (Total Yes : Total No)

Chi square - 9.84; df = 1; $p < 0.05$; Figures in the parenthesis shows percentage

hood, however there have been various opinions expressed by local administrators (officers as well as personnel below officer class) in private conversations. The survey has thus revealed a divided opinion among all ranks on desirability of retention of an HIV Positive individual. Although most persons surveyed had indicated an understanding of the danger posed by the HIV Positive individual to others, but due to the prejudice or lack of appreciation of the relatively simple means of ensuring prevention of transmission of the agent, a majority of individuals did not recommend retention on their ship and a large proportion did not wish to retain these personnel in service either. The difference in opinions expressed by officers as a group appear to indicate clearly a difference in awareness levels among officers as compared to that among personnel below officer rank. It is now necessary, with increasing number of HIV Positive individuals in service, to ensure that all out efforts are made to enable acceptance of such personnel as efficient members of the crew. This is because, the fears which lead to the shunning of an HIV Positive colleague, derive mainly from such misconceptions.

The risk of stigmatization, discrimination and isolation should be challenged not by denying basic information but by fighting for acceptance, tolerance and solidarity [6]. However there appears to be a case for exemption from employment of such individuals in high risk areas like patient care and in close confines of small ships and submarines where chances of injuries drawing blood are more; besides the need for

close cohabitation due to cramped living and small working spaces. This is in contrast to the usual working and living conditions on shore. The study has indicated a divided opinion on retention of HIV Positive individuals on ships as well as continuation in service at present. This is at variance with the study of others who noted the general attitude towards these people as moderate and open with fewer instances of ostracism [7,8] However in view of the large number of persons clearly being biased due to misconceptions of transmission risks, intensive education measures are clearly indicated and are very likely to increase the acceptance of HIV Positive sailors in ships as well as shore establishments in future.

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