

AWARENESS OF WOMEN TOWARDS AN EMERGING THREAT

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Background: The human immunodeficiency virus/Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic continues its deadly assault in different parts of the world. Over 20 million people have died since the first case of AIDS was identified in 1981. Despite increased spending on HIV/AIDS programmes and improved responses by many governments, current global efforts remain entirely inadequate for an epidemic that is continuing to spiral out of control. The objective of this study was to determine the level of awareness about HIV and AIDS among women attending the obstetrics and gynaecology clinic. **Methods:** This Descriptive study was conducted in the Obstetric & Gynaecology clinic at LUMHS, Hyderabad Pakistan from 5th July 2007 to 3rd Dec 2007. A total of 178 women attending obstetric and gynaecology clinic of age 20–55 years were selected randomly. Information was collected by pre-designed questionnaire to assess the level of awareness about HIV/AIDS. **Results:** About 83.7% women had heard about HIV/AIDS and only 44.3% correctly stated the difference in HIV/AIDS. Only 41.5% of respondents knew how would infected person present, and 55.6% respondents knew that it is transmitted through close sexual relationship, while less than 50% correctly answered about mode of transmission through coughing, sneezing, hand shaking, kissing and ear/nose piercing. Among the respondents, 52.2% correctly answered that screening of blood before transmission can prevent HIV and only 38.2% respondents knew that HIV is preventable disease. **Conclusion:** Women demonstrated lack of knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS and there are considerable misconceptions and myths in certain aspects which need to be clarified through educating women.

Keywords: AIDS, HIV infection, women, prevention

INTRODUCTION

The human immunodeficiency virus/Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic continues its deadly assault in different parts of the world. Over 20 million people have died since the first case of AIDS was identified in 1981. In 2005, there were 5 million new infections and the number of people living with HIV globally reached to highest level with an estimated 40.3 million people.¹

The main routes of HIV into the body are through sexual contact, contaminated blood transfusion or from mother to child. HIV/AIDS, however, primarily remains, sexually transmitted disease as about 90% of total worldwide reported cases contracted the virus through sexual contacts.¹ Despite increased spending on HIV/AIDS programmes and improved responses by many governments, current global efforts remain entirely inadequate for an epidemic that is continuing to spiral out of control.

The HIV/AIDS also poses serious threats to Pakistan. Till recently, Pakistan was categorized as a 'low prevalence high risk' country for HIV infection. An estimated 85,000 persons or 0.1% of the adult population in the country are infected with HIV.^{2,3}

There is low literacy rate among the general public specially women, which increases the calamity many fold. A significant section of Pakistani society is still largely unaware of the presence of HIV/AIDS.^{4,5} Because of these factors, Pakistan has to take rigorous and sustained action to prevent a generalized HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Latest evidence indicates that the situation is changing rapidly in this country. Recently, concentrated out breaks of HIV have been found among injecting drug users in Karachi and Larkana districts of Sindh; where over 20% of those tested were found infected.^{2,3} High levels of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infections among other high-risk populations such as female sex workers and long distance truck drivers in the country have also been reported.^{2,3}

The social taboos prevent patients from reporting their affliction, and thus a large numbers of cases go unreported. By the end of 2003, only 1,951 HIV-positive and 246 AIDS cases were officially reported.^{6,7} Although the prevalence of HIV is still low, the country is highly vulnerable to an escalating epidemic due to number of significant risk factors.⁸

In the absence of preventive and curative medicines for HIV/AIDS, the key instrument or intervention to arrest spread is to disseminate the knowledge, raise awareness and bring about behaviour change in vulnerable segments of the society.

In Pakistan only a few studies have been conducted regarding knowledge of women about AIDS. This study will evaluate level of awareness about HIV/AIDS in women on the area.

SUBJECT AND METHODS

This descriptive study was conducted from 5th July 2007 to 3rd December 2007 on a women attending Gynaecology out patient department of Liaquat University Hospital, Hyderabad. It receives patients

from Hyderabad city and nearby villages. About 50–60 patients visit Gynaecology out patient department daily. Among these, 178 women of 20–55 years were included in the study on convenience.

After taking informed consent information was collected on pre-designed questionnaire, containing questions regarding basic knowledge of disease, its causative organism, route of transmission, high-risk group and its prevention, myths and misconceptions. Respondents were also asked about the source of information. The respondents were asked if they had ever heard or knew about HIV infection.

Questionnaire was in Urdu language. All data was analysed by SPSS version 11.0. Frequency and percentages were calculated to describe the results.

RESULTS

A total of 178 women were included in this study. About 68 (38.20%) women were illiterate, 61 (34.26%) had primary education, 41 (23.0%) had secondary and 8 (4.49%) had higher secondary education.

Total 20 questions were asked regarding knowledge of about HIV/AIDS and its mode of transmission from infected person (Table-1).

Table –1: Knowledge of women regarding HIV/AIDS and its mode of transmission from infected person

Questions	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer	Don't Know
Have you heard about HIV/AIDS?	149 (83.7%)	9(5.0%)	20(11.2%)
What is HIV/AIDS?	79 (44.3%)	71 (39.8%)	28 (15.7%)
How will infected person present?	74(41.5%)	65 (36.5%)	39 (21.9%)
Where should the patients be kept after diagnosis?	86 (48.3%)	74 (41.5%)	18 (10.1%)
Is AIDS present in Pakistan?	98 (55.0%)	36 (20.2%)	44 (24.7%)
What is the mode of transmission of AIDS?			
Coughing/Sneezing	68 (38.2%)	91 (51.1%)	19 (10.6%)
Close sexual relation	99 (55.6%)	67 (37.6%)	12 (6.7%)
Hand shaking	71 (39.8%)	84 (47.1%)	23 (12.9%)
Through infected blood	89 (50.0%)	69 (38.7%)	23 (12.9%)
Kissing	65 (36.5%)	62 (34.8%)	51 (28.6%)
From mother to baby	71 (39.8%)	21 (11.7%)	86 (48.3%)
During delivery	81 (45.5%)	63 (35.3%)	34 (19.1%)
Use of infected needles	85 (47.7%)	71 (39.8%)	22 (12.3%)
Mosquito Bites	60 (33.7%)	81 (45.5%)	37 (20.7%)
Ear/Nose pricking by infected needles	68 (38.2%)	94 (52.8%)	16 (8.9%)
Sharing under clothes	61 (34.2%)	82 (46.0%)	35 (19.6%)
Sharing water/plates	71 (39.8%)	86 (48.3%)	21 (11.7%)
Working with AIDS patient	67 (37.6%)	91 (51.1%)	20 (11.2%)
Tears	20 (11.2%)	86 (48.3%)	72 (40.4%)
Thru Breast-feeding	17 (9.5%)	89 (50%)	72 (40.4%)

One hundred forty-nine (83.7%) women had heard about HIV/AIDS. A total of 79 (44.3%) women correctly stated about difference in HIV/AIDS, while

71 (39.8%) women answered incorrectly and 28 (15.7%) women did not know about the difference. Only 74 (41.5%) of women knew how would infected person present while 65 (36.5%) women answered incorrectly and 39 (21.9%) women did not know.

Out of 178, only 86 (48.3%) women correctly said that after diagnosis of HIV/AIDS where patient should be kept and 98 (55.0%) women knew that HIV/AIDS is present in Pakistan. While 36 (20.0%) women answered incorrectly and 44 (24.7%) women did not know about the presence of HIV/AIDS in Pakistan.

Source of information regarding AIDS in these women was TV in 112 (62.9%), print media and radio in 18 (10.1%) and friends and relatives in 48 (26.9%).

Regarding mode of transmission of HIV/AIDS, 99 (55.6%) women knew that it is transmitted through close sexual relationship, 89 (50.0%) women knew that it is transmitted through blood while less than 50% women correctly answered regarding mode of transmission.

Questions were asked regarding women's knowledge about suggested high risk groups for acquiring HIV infection (Table-2). Ninety-eight (55.0%) women knew that person with multiple sexual partners are at high risk of acquiring HIV infection, 121 (67.9%) women knew that prostitutes, and 91 (51.1%) women knew that drug addicts are included in high risk group for HIV infection. Less than 50% women correctly answered other questions regarding high risk groups for acquiring infection.

Table–2: Knowledge of women regarding high risk groups for acquiring HIV Infection

Questions asked from women	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer	Don't Know
Person with multiple sexual partners	98 (55.0%)	41 (23.0%)	39 (21.9%)
Homosexual males	81 (45.5%)	69 (38.7%)	28 (15.7%)
Prostitutes	121 (67.9%)	12 (6.7%)	45 (25.2%)
Females as compare to males	64 (35.9%)	71 (39.8%)	43 (24.1%)
Hospital staff	35 (19.6%)	98 (55.0%)	45 (25.2%)
Muslims	71 (39.8%)	68 (38.2%)	39 (21.9%)
Hindus	81 (45.5%)	29 (16.2%)	68 (38.2%)
Christians	74 (41.5%)	38 (21.3%)	66 (37.0%)
Smokers	81 (45.5%)	29 (16.2%)	68 (38.2%)
Drug adductors	91 (51.1%)	26 (14.6%)	61 (34.2%)
Alcohol addicted	86 (48.3%)	21 (11.7%)	71 (39.8%)

Questions were asked regarding suggestive preventive measures against HIV/AIDS. Out of 178 respondents, 93 (52.2%) correctly answered that screening of blood can prevent HIV, only 68 (32.2%) knew that HIV is preventable disease, while 81 (45.5%) women answered incorrectly and 29 (16.2%) women did not know that HIV is preventable (Table-3). Regarding prevention of HIV, less than 50% of women answered correctly.

Table-3: Knowledge of women regarding prevention of HIV/AIDS

Questions asked from women	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer	Don't Know
Medicines	96 (53.9%)	28 (15.7%)	54 (30.3%)
Vaccination	64 (35.9%)	81 (45.5%)	33 (18.5%)
Avoiding abnormal Sexual behaviour	74 (41.5%)	34 (19.1%)	70 (39.3%)
Using condoms	88 (49.4%)	28 (15.7%)	62 (34.8%)
Avoiding Homosexuality	74 (41.5%)	12 (6.7%)	92 (51.6%)
Avoiding using needles of injection	61 (34.2%)	48 (26.9%)	69 (38.7%)
Screening of blood before transfusion	93 (52.2%)	17 (9.5%)	68 (38.2%)
Is it is preventable	68 (38.2%)	81 (45.5%)	29 (16.2%)

DISCUSSION

AIDS is a preventable disease. The awareness attitude and behaviour of the female population is one of the major determinants in the battle against HIV infection. AIDS continue to be a critical threat for adolescents, especially females. The knowledge and believes of the females may be the main driving force for penetrating HIV/AIDS infection.

The present study revealed a variable lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS among females. In different studies conducted in Pakistan, females were usually found to have satisfactory knowledge about HIV/AIDS infection, they however, had a number of misconceptions and misbelieves.⁹

A study conducted by Haider G, *et al* at Isra University Hospital found satisfactory knowledge about AIDS/HIV, but had considerable misconceptions on certain aspects of disease.¹⁰ Reasons of lack of knowledge in our study population is probably because majority of these women were uneducated. There were many misconceptions about HIV/AIDS transmission by hand shaking, coughing and sneezing etc. This problem was also addressed by previous investigators such as Agrawal *et al*, Dicemente *et al* and Sikand *et al*.¹¹⁻¹³

In this study, majority of women knew that AIDS can be transmitted by close sexual contact and through blood but many were unaware that ear/nose piercing can cause HIV/AIDS. In a country like ours, where ear/nose piercing at a very early age is almost a common practice, this unawareness can lead to rapid spread of HIV infection. These findings concur with the study conducted by Mirza on male students in Islamabad.¹⁴

A substantial number of women in study thought that if person belongs to other religion except Muslim would be at increase risk of acquiring infection from HIV/AIDS. This could be due to religious obligations. The findings concur with other study conducted by Radanovich where he stated that Muslims countries take solace in the belief that Islamic cultural values provide a degree of protection against AIDS. It is true that Islam promotes a life of

behaviour for HIV/AIDS prevention but this theory is not necessarily put into practice.¹⁵ This kind of thinking also ignores the role of non-sexual modes of transmission.

Television was the common source of knowledge among our subjects. In the course of 20th century, audiovisual media have become the means of communicating ideas and information about health and medicines to a mass of audience.

In Pakistan, an AIDS prevention and control programme is working since 1987 and the groups at increased risk of acquiring the HIV infection have been identified.^{3,8,16,17}

There is low literacy rate among the general public, especially women which increases the calamity manifold. A significant section of Pakistani society is still largely unaware of the presence of HIV/AIDS.^{18,19} Because of these factors, Pakistan has to take rigorous and sustained action to prevent a generalized HIV/AIDS epidemic.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a lack of knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS in women of our setup and there are considerable misconceptions in certain aspect of disease. Therefore, there is need to be addressed by Mass Health Education Programme. Electronic media can be used to address the misconceptions and to increase the level of awareness.

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