

News Release

Ministry of Health Detects 22 New HIV Cases

November 2021 THIMPHU-BHUTAN: In the last five months from July to November 2021, the Ministry of Health has detected 22 new HIV cases (13 male and 9 female). The majority (55%, n=12) of them are between the age range of 30-39 years old and the minimum of 5% (n=1) from the age group between 6-14 years old. Among the new cases, by occupational group; 6 belong to farmers, 5 each belong to housewives and private/business while 2 belong to drivers and 1 each belongs to minors, religious body, civil servants and corporate. In terms of the mode of transmission, 21 cases have acquired the infection through unprotected sexual route and 1 from Mother-to-Child Transmission (MTCT). Among the new cases, 9 of them were diagnosed through medical screening, 6 each from contact tracing and Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) respectively while 1 was diagnosed during the antenatal care (ANC). Currently, all the new cases are being put on care and treatment. A total of 54 HIV cases have been diagnosed in 2021 alone.

Her Excellency the Hon'ble Health Minister said: "We have two most important goals to achieve in our national response to HIV and AIDS; to find the missing cases of HIV to narrow the case detection gap of 39% of the estimated 1300 cases and to eliminate Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV, Syphilis and Hepatitis B". Hon'ble Lyonpo also mentioned that the Ministry of Health is striving to make people aware of their HIV status through innovative means of HIV testing services and linking them with quality care, support and treatment. For instance, the Ministry of Health has completed the demonstration project to assess the feasibility of HIV Self-Testing (HIVST) in Bhutan and will now be launching in six priority districts in its first phase targeting the high-risk populations. However, Hon'ble Lyonpo cautioned about the likely risks associated with it such as false-negative results and false reassurance during the acute infection, insufficient counselling and the possibly delayed entry into care and treatment if one does not adhere to the HIVST protocol of the Ministry of Health.

The Director, Department of Public Health, Mr. Tandin Dorji said: "The Ministry of Health is also studying the use of suitable rapid test kits which can conduct triple testing of HIV, Hepatitis B and Syphilis for the pregnant mothers". He said that despite the easy availability of testing facilities in all the health centers including the standalone Health Information and Service Centers (HISC) and private diagnostic centers, the major challenge remains the unwillingness of people to come forward for testing. "We urge our people to avail the free HIV testing and counseling services as it is the only gateway for timely prevention, care and treatment," he added.

From 1993 until November 2021, of the estimated 1300 HIV cases, the Ministry of Health has diagnosed 795 (414 male and 381 female) cases. However, we still need to find 505 missing cases to bridge the current detection gap of 39%. Like many other countries in the region, the majority (70%) of the reported HIV cases in Bhutan is between the age range of 25-49 years old and 14% are between 15-24 years old while 5% are below 15 years of age and the remaining 11% are above 50 years old. This shows that HIV has primarily affected the most economically productive age group in Bhutan. About 94.2% of them have acquired HIV infection through sexual route, 5% from Mother-to-Child Transmission (MTCT), 0.4% from Injecting Drug Use (IDU) and 0.4% from blood transfusion.

Unlike in the past, we now have scientifically-proven, effective HIV medicine that can reduce HIV in the body and improve the immune system to stay healthy and live a long life. However, we must know that timely testing is the only means to know your HIV status to initiate early treatment and that good adherence to the treatment is indispensable.

HIV remains a threat domestically and globally among certain high-risk key and vulnerable populations like men who have sex with men, transgender women and men, sex workers, those who use drugs, adolescents and other marginalized populations. This calls for our greater effort to hear the voices from the most impacted communities. We remain deeply committed to ensuring equity in our program's research and policies and to serving those who are most in need.

For any clarification, please call

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