ALL NEW HIV INFECTIONS PREVENTED AMONG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

Michael Bartos, Team Leader, Strategy Support and Evaluation, UNAIDS Geneva
23 March 2011
Vienna, Austria
54th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs
All new HIV infections prevented among people who use drugs

Distinguished delegates,

I am pleased to be able to address the Commission at a crucial juncture in the response to HIV among drug users. In December of 2010 the Programme Coordinating Board of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) adopted a new strategy to guide the global response to HIV from 2011 to 2015. This strategy is grounded in an ambitious vision which member states and civil society partners have embraced, namely zero new infections, zero AIDS-related deaths and zero discrimination.

The decade or more of concerted global action against the HIV pandemic has extended the reach of HIV treatment to more than 6 million people and reduced new HIV infections in many countries by 25% or more, but there remains much to be achieved.

Among the goals agreed in the new UNAIDS Strategy is that all new HIV infections are prevented among people who use drugs, alongside the elimination of mother to child transmission and halving sexual transmission of HIV.

Despite major gaps in programme efforts directed to this goal, real country results in preventing HIV transmission among drug users suggest that where programmes are delivered at scale, achieving this ambitious goal is possible. Many countries today count the number of new infections transmitted through the sharing of contaminated drug injecting equipment in the tens or dozens. The most recent Annual Report of the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction documents European success, and there are familiar examples from Oceania, but also we can add the strong efforts made in Ukraine in recent years which have seen a major fall in new infections among drug users, and similar experiences in the fruits of scale up from Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Iran, China and Malaysia among others.

Thirty years of HIV responses among drug users show it is vital to reduce the immediate risks which present themselves to injecting drug users. Clean needles and syringes, stabilization of drug users' lives through opioid substitution therapy and access to peer
support, and, for those infected with HIV, timely access to effective antiretroviral therapy, are the cornerstones of this response.

A supportive environment is needed to make this urgent response possible. The new UNAIDS Strategy also includes the goal of halving of the number of countries which have punitive laws and practices around HIV transmission that block effective HIV responses.

Effective HIV responses among drug users can be quickly undone by counter-productive policing or criminal procedures. For example, if drug users face criminal penalties because they are carrying a clean needle, then needle and syringe programme are rapidly undermined. Programmes which have carefully and over years built up trust among drug users so they may be able to reduce problematic drug use and avoid HIV and related health threats can be devastated within weeks if legal or policing authorities demand names and addresses of clients with a view to prosecuting them. And incarcerating drug users in the name of therapy is a failed strategy which opens the door to gross human rights abuses.

And of course, there are interactions between injecting drug use as a specific contributor to HIV infections and the sexual transmission of HIV, which may in turn be mediated through sex work and sex exchanged for drugs, or through risk environments where alcohol and stimulant use are part of the sub-culture. Here, however, evidence shows us we must be cautious not to inadvertently create a message that alcohol or drug use is an excuse for unsafe sex.

The global community in adopting the UNAIDS Strategy has made a clear and ambitious commitment. It is now incumbent on all the relevant partners to rise to this challenge. UNODC as one of the 10 cosponsoring organizations of UNAIDS has a vital leading role in achieving the goal of no new HIV infections among drug users by 2015. The comparative advantage of UNODC not only lies in its technical expertise in advising countries on the most effective HIV responses for drug users and in prisons and other closed settings. It also lies in the confidence which national drug control programmes place in UNODC.

All too often, drug control and AIDS authorities seem to inhabit different worlds. UNAIDS mechanisms for a joint country programme of work at national level create a common UN system platform for joint action. The UNAIDS family looks to UNODC to ensure that this platform is also able to translate to effective support for coordinated and mutually supportive national programmes addressing drug users and the threat of HIV.

The forthcoming high level meeting of the UN General Assembly on 8 to 10 June is the next major opportunity for a global recommitment to overcoming AIDS. It will be important the world sees clearly that preventing all new HIV infections among drug users is a core and inspiring part of that recommitment.

Thank you.
Contact
UNAIDS Geneva | Sophie Barton-Knott | tel. +41 22 791 1697 | bartonknotts@unaids.org

UNAIDS
UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, is an innovative United Nations partnership that leads and inspires the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Learn more at unaids.org.