Unusual increase in reported HIV/AIDS cases among older persons in western Hunan province, China

An unusual increase in HIV/AIDS cases among older people was reported to the Hunan Centers for Disease Control between 2005 and 2007. Cases originated in four rural, western districts of this inland province of China. Given the historical concern for outbreaks of HIV in rural areas due to blood donation, these cases prompted closer examination to understand the reasons for their appearance and to take measures to prevent further spread.

Eighty cases met our investigation criterion of 50 years or older and underwent a structured interview. The median age was 65 years (range 51–82); 42% were female. Most were ethnic minorities, 76% Tuja and 9% Miao, with low education. Nearly all had been married; 43% were widowed. Most (54%) spent time away from their spouse (median >5 years); 10% were currently sexually active with a spouse; few ever used condoms with their spouse.

Investigation of the possible modes of HIV acquisition suggests most infections among men were from female sex workers (83% paid for sex, two-thirds in the last 5 years), and among women through sex (83% paid for sex, two-thirds in the last 5 years), and among women through activities (83% sexual activity with a spouse; few ever used condoms with their spouse).

Our investigation highlights that basic information on HIV/AIDS is not reaching all parts of China, and may especially lag among rural and older people. Discussion of sex with older people has been taboo in China, presenting special challenges in finding effective ways to reach them. As treatment extends survival, the cohort of persons living with HIV will also age. The movement of people between urban and rural areas, an ageing population and the shift of the HIV/AIDS epidemic to sexual transmission are three trends in China that may now have a dangerous intersection.

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Xin Chen, Jun Zheng, Jian Mei He, BiYun Qin, Yifei Hu, Lu Wang, Ning Wang

1 AIDS/STI Division, Hunan Provincial CDC, Changsha, China; 2 The Office of State Council AIDS Working committee(SCAWCO), National Center for HIV/AIDS Control and Prevention/China CDC, Beijing, China

Correspondence to Dr Yifei Hu, China National Center for HIV/AIDS Control and Prevention/China CDC, No.27 Nanwei Rd, Xuanwu District, Beijing, China; huyifei@yahoo.com

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Pond MJ1, Patel S2, Hinds J3, Newton R3, Werner K3, Butcher PD1 and Sadiq ST1. 2
1. Centre for Infection and Immunity, Division of Clinical Sciences, St George’s, University of London, UK
2. Department of Genitourinary Medicine, St George’s Healthcare NHS Trust, London, UK
3. MRC Biostatistics Unit, Institute of Public Health, Cambridge, UK

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