

## LETTER

## 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,<sup>1</sup> 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% Tujia 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 infected husbands. One case had a history of selling blood, most recently in 1981. Eight received a blood transfusion, three before 1976 and five after 1984. All denied drug use; all men denied male–male sex; all women denied extramarital sex. Among men buying sex, 97% never used condoms.

Two-thirds had never heard of HIV prior to their diagnosis. Few (14%) knew HIV could be transmitted sexually, through blood (11%) or from mother to child (4%). Of the men reporting commercial sex contact, 82% had no knowledge that condoms could prevent HIV. Most cases (86%) were detected incidentally during the course of treatment for other diseases or because their spouse was HIV-positive. By interview, 78% indicated their spouse had tested for HIV, of whom 69% were reported to be positive.

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<sup>2</sup> are three trends in China that may now have a dangerous intersection.

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**Patient consent** Obtained.

**Ethics approval** This study was approved by NCAIDS/China CDC (FWA00001501).

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## CORRECTIONS

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The author's name Zidal SV should be correctly spelt as S Zarate Vidal.