



news release

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HIV/AIDS 'STILL A BIG PROBLEM' AMONG EU DRUG USERS, SAYS DRUG AGENCY

HIV/AIDS is “still a big problem” in Europe, according to the Lisbon-based drugs agency **EMCDDA**, at a press conference today (Wednesday 26 June) to mark the **UN International Day Against Drugs**.

The theme of the Day this year is **HIV/AIDS**. The need to address this topic is urgent, as there is a risk of ‘acceptance’ - the public getting used to alarming figures and forgetting the importance of prevention.

The **EMCDDA** explains that, although the picture generally is stable, new infections continue to occur at constant rates. “Data still show very high **HIV** prevalence - more than 25% - among Injecting Drug Users (IDUs) in some EU regions and countries, eg some Italian regions, some Portuguese cities, Spain, and among older IDUs in France. It highlights Lisbon, Barcelona, Madrid, Sevilla, Amsterdam and Dundee (Scotland) as among the worst in this respect.”

EMCDDA: “These data reflect mainly older epidemics but, in some cases, rises have been reported in recent years at a national level - eg in Finland and Ireland - and locally, eg in Heerlen, the Netherlands, and some Italian regions. This suggests that risk behaviour, such as lack of injecting hygiene and failure to use condoms, may be increasing again.

IDUs are the group most at risk of **HIV** in the EU. “They can form a reservoir of infection for continued risk of transmission to the wider population, eg sexual transmission and transmission from mother to newborn. So high prevalence among IDUs can ‘fuel’ a heterosexual epidemic.”

Levels of hepatitis C are extremely high in IDUs all over Europe and this indicates the same injecting risk behaviour as that for **HIV/AIDS**. “So hepatitis C is a sensitive indicator of injecting risk behaviour. New infections are occurring particularly among young injectors and those who have started injecting recently - and this does indicate the extent to which people are putting themselves at risk.”

EMCDDA does have worries about some countries’ data on ‘coverage’ of prevention measures. “We have preliminary estimates on the coverage of prevention efforts among drug users – eg the

proportion of IDUs probably being reached by needle-exchange programmes. But these data do suggest large variations in coverage, with the UK and Spain probably among the best and coverage possibly very low in many other countries. This is surprising in view of the fact that **AIDS** epidemic is not recent among drug users. These data need to be urgently improved and refined.”

Better data on access to treatment for IDUs is also a priority. “This is an important issue. There are indications that in some countries drug users are not sufficiently covered by **AIDS** treatment. At the moment the ‘standard of care’ is that everybody who is **HIV**-infected should have direct access to treatment, as it can delay the onset of **AIDS** for several years. We need to know the extent to which this standard is being met.”

Overall, the **EMCDDA** is concerned that if control measures such as prevention including needle exchange and condom availability had been sufficient, the problem of **HIV/AIDS** among IDUs should have been slowly diminishing in the most-affected areas. “There are some signs of this - eg in France, Spain and some regions of Italy - but in some other countries it’s still on the up.

“Our impression is that control of **HIV/AIDS** in IDUs is still insufficient. Mainly the picture is stable because the epidemic has already affected most of Western Europe, although data suggest that some countries, particularly England, have avoided an epidemic by early and timely prevention. But in several countries where there is a big injecting problem the **HIV/AIDS** epidemic has struck heavily and we see large numbers of infected people. The big worry is that new infections are still occurring.”

For more information please see *Annual report 2001*:
<http://annualreport.emcdda.org/en/chap3/infectious-diseases.html>

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