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## **UPDATE ON THE HIV EPIDEMIC IN VIET NAM**

### **Overall picture of the HIV epidemic**

Vietnam's HIV-epidemic is still in the concentrated phase, with the highest sero-prevalence among most-at-risk populations, including injecting drug users (IDUs), female sex workers (FSWs) and men who have sex with men (MSM). Prevalence in the general population is estimated at 0.53%. In 2006, there were an estimated 283,000 people living with HIV. (MOH, 2006a)

The reported numbers are far fewer, mostly due to limited testing, but also to under-reporting and misclassification in many steps of the reporting system. Cumulative notifications to May 2007, were 126,543 HIV cases, 24 788 cases of AIDS, and 13,847 AIDS-related deaths. In the first 5 months of 2007, there were 9,998 HIV cases, 4, 593 cases of AIDS, and 2, 072 AIDS-related deaths reported. HIV-infections have been reported nationwide in all 64 provinces/cities; more than 90% of districts and more than 50% of wards/communes (MOH, 2007).

The epidemic is still in a rapid growth phase, with far more people infected compared to deaths from AIDS each year. The estimated number of people infected with HIV more than doubled between 2000 and 2005 from approximately 122,000 to 263,000. A national estimation and projection study (MOH, 2005) showed that, without comprehensive and effective HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, in the period 2005-2010, Vietnam will have between 30,000 - 40,000 new HIV infections annually and the total number of HIV infected people will increase to 311,500 by 2010.

By 2005, an estimated 56,000 people had died of AIDS-related causes. The estimated annual number of AIDS deaths increased dramatically from 3,000 in 2000 to 14,300 in 2005 and, in the absence of good access to HIV treatment, deaths will increase to 26,700 in 2010 and then plateau for several years(MOH, 2006a).

Due to increased heterosexual transmission, the number of infected females compared to males has increased each year. The estimated male to female ratio for HIV cases dropped from 3:1 to 2:1 over the period 2000 to 2005. This is indicative of increased heterosexual transmission as an increasing number of males infected through sex work and injecting drug use infect their female partners. (MOH, 2006a)

### **Dynamics of the epidemic**

The drug using population, of which an estimated 75% are IDUs, is increasing at an annual rate of 9% and may reach 208,760 people in 2010 (MOPS, 2006). Estimated HIV prevalence among IDUs in 2005 was 34% (MOH, 2005). In high prevalence provinces of Hai Phong and Quang Ninh, HIV prevalence among IDUs in the 2005-2006 IBBS provinces had reached 66% and 59.0% respectively. The data showed evidence of rapid HIV transmission among a large new and young injecting drug use population. For example, almost half of IDUs in HCMC (48%) were under 25 years old and about one quarter (24%) had injected for less than one year. HIV was spreading quickly among both of these groups with 33% and 28%, respectively, already HIV infected (MOH, 2006a). These rates were as high as those for older and more experienced injectors. This pattern was apparent in other provinces. Needle sharing is still

common among injecting drug users. It ranged from as low as 5% in 4 border provinces (Nguyen et al, 2007) to 19% - 24% in Ho Chi Minh city and two neighboring provinces Vung Tau and Dong Nai ( Le, 2006) and 12 – 33% in the 7 IBBS provinces (MOH, 2006a).

Estimated HIV prevalence among FSWs in 2005 was 6.5%. The IBBS data demonstrated that over 10% of FSW were HIV-infected in five out of the seven provinces. HIV infection was highly correlated with injection drug use; injecting sex workers were from 3.5 to 31 times more likely to be HIV-infected compared to non-injectors (MOH, 2006a).

The growing rate of heterosexual transmission is bringing Vietnam closer to a second wave of the AIDS epidemic. IDUs and FSWs are a bridge to the general population. In the 2005-2006 IBBS, 20% to 40% of IDUs reported having had sex with a sex worker and 28% to 60% of IDUs reported sex with a regular partner in the past 12 months. The results from two other studies support these findings. In a study by Nguyen et al (2007), on average, twenty two percent of IDUs (ranging from 9% to 34%) recently had had sex with FSWs. In a study by Le et al (2006), forty one percent female and 20% male drug users had sex with casual partners. Among drug users, those who had sex, 20% had sex with friends in their drug use groups.

Condom use is uncommon among IDUs for sex both with regular and commercial sex partners. Numbers of IDUs reporting using condoms consistently during the last 12 months when they have sex with regular partners ranged from 16% - 36% (MOH, 2006a). Female sex workers reported low consistent condom use with clients (including one time and regular clients), with big differences between provinces, ranging from 36% to 89% (MOH, 2006a).

The data on HIV prevalence and risk behaviors of men who have sex with men in Viet Nam is still limited. HIV prevalence was high among men who have sex with men, 5% in HCMC and 9% in Hanoi. MSM potentially have multiple partners, both male and female. Risk behaviors were not uncommon. Four in ten MSM reported sexual contacts with women in the past year and around 15% reporting sex with a FSW. Consistent condom use in the last month was low (31% in Hanoi and 37% in Ho Chi Minh City). Commercial sex was popular with 22% MSM in Hanoi and 41% MSM in Ho Chi Minh City ever sold sex in the past year. Among MSM respondents, 9% in Hanoi and 4% in Ho Chi Minh City reported that they have ever injected drugs (MOH, 2006a)

HIV prevalence among tuberculosis (TB) cases has been increasing over the last decade. According to the sentinel surveillance, TB patients infected with HIV increased from 1.5% in 2000 to 4.96% in 2006. The prevalence exceeded 5% in many provinces including Ho Chi Minh city and Ha Noi where more than 10% of TB cases are HIV- infected (MOH, 2006b).

The last round of sentinel surveillance showed that the HIV prevalence among pregnant women in most of the sites, both in rural and urban areas, were well under 1%. The HIV prevalence among new conscripts was also well under 1% (MOH, 2006). The study in 4 border provinces showed a low HIV prevalence of under 1% among young men (15 – 24 years old) with the exception of 1.3 % in Lai Chau (Nguyen, 2007).

There is also a worrying level of HIV transmission among mobile populations. The HIV prevalence among this group was as high as 2.1% and 2.5% in Dong Thap and Kien Giang provinces. A high proportion of mobile males had sex with FSWs in the last month (13%) (Nguyen, 2007).

*New references (from 2006 and 2007)*

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*Old references, but used in update above*

- Ministry of Health, Vietnam (2005). HIV/AIDS estimation and projection in Vietnam for 2005 – 2010 period.