

CARIBBEAN EPIDEMIOLOGY CENTRE (CAREC)



Pan American Health Organization
Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Regional Office of the
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MEDIA RELEASE

CAREC: TOO MANY PEOPLE DYING OF AIDS IN THE CARIBBEAN

PORT OF SPAIN, November 28, 2005 --- The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC/PAHO/WHO) says there are still too many people dying of AIDS related illnesses in the Caribbean despite the availability of life saving medicines which could reverse the situation.

The Centre lists this as one of the lingering disturbing features of the epidemic in the region due to the proportionately low level of access to these medicines by people requiring them.

CAREC says despite some levelling off in the AIDS figures in the region, there is need for concern over the rate of new infections, particularly among young women, as well as the sustained levels of rampant stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and vulnerable groups as sex workers and men who have sex with men, which keeps people from accessing proper treatment and care.

The most recently released UNAIDS report on the global epidemic indicates that there are about 240,000 persons living with HIV/AIDS in the CARICOM region which includes Haiti and incorporates most CAREC member-countries. The report also reveals that 24,000 people died of AIDS-related conditions in 2004 alone, and that there were 25,000 new infections during 2005. On the other hand, however, it has cited in particular the achievements of the Bahamas, Bermuda, and Barbados, where infection levels, including mother to child transmission of HIV, and deaths due to AIDS, have been on the decline over the past few years.

Acknowledging some of these gains, CAREC says the improvements indicate the possibility of slowing the growth of the epidemic and gradually turning the situation around in the Caribbean. But the Centre also points out that from its experience in working with these countries, the achievements have been as a result of action that included improved prevention efforts, the expansion of voluntary counselling and testing services, the provision of anti retroviral regimens to persons living with HIV/AIDS, and also enhanced clinical management and treatment of AIDS at the community level.

Accordingly, CAREC says, in order for these successes to be replicated more widely in the region, there is need for a well balanced response to the epidemic in all countries with renewed emphasis on prevention, care and support.

National programmes against HIV/AIDS must continue to promote all forms of prevention including proper condom use and reduction of the number of partners and to encourage voluntary counselling and testing for HIV. Countries must also make every effort to stamp out stigma and discrimination and create an environment in which people have the opportunity to access all relevant services whenever and wherever the test is positive.

CAREC says it will continue to be a strong advocate for the elimination of stigma and discrimination in all aspects that affect persons living with HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable groups; it will continue to provide technical assistance to member countries to marshal their public health response to the epidemic and will do so in collaboration with its regional and international partners under the rubric of the Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP).

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CARIBBEAN EPIDEMIOLOGY CENTRE (CAREC-PAHO-WHO)
Special Programme on Sexually Transmitted Infections
WORLD AIDS DAY BRIEF 2005

Theme: Stop AIDS, Keep The Promise

The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC/PAHO/WHO) wishes to acknowledge and applaud the gains made by some of its member countries (CMCs) in their battle against the HIV/AIDS epidemic as evidenced from the Centre's own surveillance data and from the latest report by UNAIDS on the global HIV/AIDS situation.

However, CAREC remains extremely concerned that despite some levelling off in the AIDS epidemic, there remain some features of the epidemic in the Caribbean that are ominously significant and which need urgent on-going attention:

- a high number of AIDS-related deaths,
- a proportionately low level of access to lifesaving treatment by persons requiring it,
- new HIV infections particularly among young women
- rampant stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and vulnerable groups such as sex workers and men who have sex with men.

The UNAIDS report on the global epidemic indicates that there are about 240,000 persons living with HIV/AIDS in the CARICOM region which include Haiti and most CAREC member –countries, and that there were 25,000 new infections during 2005.

All of this means that there is no room for complacency in our continued approach in the Caribbean to prevent and control this epidemic

CAREC believes that on the basis of the results of HIV/AIDS prevention and control initiatives in the Bahamas, Barbados, and Bermuda, it is possible to slow down the epidemic and gradually turn the situation around in the Caribbean. In addition to these three countries, in Trinidad and Tobago over the past year, infection levels, including mother to child transmission of HIV, and deaths due to AIDS, have shown some encouraging signs. These experiences have been specially identified on the positive side of the regional picture in the global AIDS report. It should be noted from the CAREC experience in working with these countries that these gains have been as a result of the institution of improved prevention efforts, the expansion of voluntary counselling and testing services and the provision of anti retroviral regimens, and also enhanced clinical management and treatment of AIDS at the community level.

CAREC, through its Special Programme on Sexually Transmitted Infections (SPSTI), has been providing leadership and action against HIV/AIDS in partnership with a number of regional and international institutions since 1987. The Centre's purview spans 21 countries incorporating all CARICOM member states, and United Kingdom and Dutch Overseas Territories in the Caribbean. Its remit has involved technical and financial assistance to countries to facilitate strategic planning for an expanded response to the epidemic, the improvement of surveillance and laboratory systems, the development of care and treatment plans, and behaviour change and communication interventions in support of prevention and control efforts.

Against this backdrop and the latest picture of the AIDS epidemic in the region, CAREC wishes to make the following observations:

- It is possible to reduce the epidemic in the Caribbean as has been demonstrated in the statistics from the Bahamas, Barbados and Bermuda. In these countries where the epidemic appears to be declining, strong political leadership, comprehensive prevention programmes and clinical management and treatment of STIs and AIDS have played a vital role. In this context, it should be noted that stigma and discrimination impede access to services and every effort must be made by

CMCs to undertake interventions aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination as a crucial prerequisite to creating an environment in which people will feel comfortable to access voluntary counselling and testing and all relevant services whenever and wherever the test is positive.

- There is need for caution, and no room for complacency. Although there has been increased access to care and treatment at various national levels in the Caribbean, there have been too many AIDS-related deaths, some 24,000 during 2004 alone. This is unacceptable in a situation which can be prevented by making anti-retroviral treatment accessible to all as part of efficient services that provide incentives for testing and counselling and opportunities for prevention
- There is need for a well balanced response to the epidemic in all countries, with renewed emphasis on prevention (including promotion of options such as abstinence, partner fidelity, and condom use) and comprehensive care and support. There is need for particular focus on such highly vulnerable groups as sex workers, men who have sex with men and mobile populations who are often the targets of stigma and discrimination and are consequently marginalized and discouraged from seeking or even denied proper care and treatment. In this regard, CAREC is committed to improved behavioural surveillance that addresses the double stigmatization of those groups who, in addition to being infected, are frowned upon by society because of their lifestyles.
- .Special attention must also be paid to the young women in the Caribbean, whose infection levels in some instances are six times higher in the 15-19 year old age group than among males of the same age.

CAREC continues to commit itself to reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on Caribbean populations and will intensify its efforts with its regional and international partners under the rubric of the Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP) to consolidate and build on the gains being realised in CMCs.

CAREC's actions will include

- Strengthening health information and surveillance systems and behavioural research capabilities in member countries to provide reliable information on HIV/AIDS/STI to allow for decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation of action. The Centre has adopted a decentralized approach to provide more direct support to priorities identified by countries in dealing with their respective HIV/AIDS situations.
- Providing technical assistance to CMCs to build their capacity to deliver efficient and effective HIV/AIDS/STI services in clinical and diagnostic management, including care and psychosocial support to persons living with HV/AIDS
- Assisting countries to develop, implement and evaluate behavioural and communication interventions targetting vulnerable populations such as Youth, Women, Persons Living with HIV/AIDS, Men who have Sex with Men, Sex Workers, and Migrant Populations.

Overall, therefore, we need to keep the promise to use the available resources to scale up prevention and access to treatment, care and support, and combat stigma and discrimination. We know these are the necessary actions so let's commit to act upon what we know.

Stop AIDS, Keep the Promise

Caribbean Epidemiology Centre
Special Programme on Sexually Transmitted Infections
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