HIV drugs for children badly needed in China

- VIH/Sida - Accès aux ARV et aux soins - Enfants VIH+ -

Reuters / By Tan Ee Lyn / Tue May 16, 2006

HONG KONG (Reuters) - China needs to manufacture pediatric HIV drugs for its tens of thousands of children suffering from the disease, an AIDS activist said, adding that the state was not giving enough help to the most vulnerable.

Antiretroviral drugs help prevent HIV replication and prolong the lives of people with the disease. But pediatric formulations are not widely produced as they are not regarded as commercially viable, because rich nations are very successful in preventing mother-to-child transmission of the virus.

Chinese companies began producing at least three generic ARVs in 2002, which sharply reduced the cost of caring for its citizens living with the disease, but does not manufacture dosages for children.

"Over the last four years, children have died literally in my arms. There are many, many children without ARVs yet, so if we can provide ARVs on time, we can prolong their lives," said Chung To, a leading Hong Kong-based AIDS activist.

To is the founder of the Chi Heng Foundation, which provides education and help for children suffering the impact of AIDS in China. To goes often to the central province of Henan, where many impoverished farmers and members of their families contracted HIV in the 1990s after they sold blood to unsanitary clinics.

The Bill Clinton Foundation donated ARVs drugs for 200 children in 2005, 86 of which were distributed through Chi Heng.

"Until last summer, there were no pediatric ARVs available in China. So if you were a child with HIV in China, it is very hard to get treatment today," To told Reuters.

"I hope the Bill Clinton effort will make them (China) more aware that there are children affected by HIV, they shouldn't just take care of adults."

China lowered by around 30 percent the estimated number of people living with HIV/AIDS to 650,000 in January, but activists say the figure is unbelievably small.

It says it has 76,000 AIDS orphans and estimates the figure will hit 260,000 in 2010.

"Even going by this figure (650,000), there can't be just 76,000 children impacted by AIDS. You can't have ten times more adults to just one kid," To said. He reckons there are at least a million children either living with the disease or suffering the impact of it - living with HIV/AIDS-stricken parents.

To also urged China not to wait to help such children. For now, aid is given only to children who have lost both parents.

"For children with parents living with HIV, they suffer a lot more because they have to take care of their parents, they are traumatized seeing the death of their parents ... they have to earn money, so they end up taking care of both

dying parents and younger siblings," he said.

China strongly encourages citizens to test for HIV. In 2005 alone, there were 70,000 new infections and 25,000 died of AIDS.