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Primary Care: The Platform for Universal Access in HIV

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On the eve of the IV Latin American and Caribbean Forum on HIV/AIDS and STI, to be held in Buenos Aires in April, I wish to call attention to two important events that are necessarily intertwined in visualizing the necessary response to HIV. They are: the official launch of the report *Towards Universal Access: Scaling up Priority HIV/AIDS Interventions in the Health Sector* and the imminent commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Alma-Ata conference, a historic milestone with its launch of the Primary Health Care Strategy (PHC).

Our Region has put forth tremendous efforts in recent years and has made great strides in dealing with the HIV epidemic. However, the challenge is still before us. Far from giving up, we must forge ahead and redouble our efforts to ensure the continuity of the efficient responses that we maintained up to now through sustained action and synergy. These efforts must also help to eradicate stigma and discrimination, which are both causative factors and consequences of the spread of the epidemic. Our next steps must be firm and unyielding, without delay or retreat, and, moreover, must be guided by the evidence and lessons learned. The goal should be to secure *universal access*, which means comprehensive, integrated care, prevention, and treatment for all people. The report on universal access, which the Secretariat of UNAIDS, together with WHO and UNICEF, will issue in April 2007, analyzes the current status of universal access and offers a series of recommendations for improving the global response to AIDS.

PAHO technical cooperation will continue to assist Member States in achieving universal access. In this regard, the Regional HIV/STI Plan for the Health Sector 2006-2015 reflects the integrated efforts of the health sector to halt the epidemic and promote a response that expands care, prevention, and treatment.

In this new scenario, the principles of PHC are essential elements for achieving the goal we have set. For services to be accessible to all, they must be distributed equitably in countries, regions, and districts. The health needs of individuals, families, and communities should be addressed in a comprehensive, not fragmented, manner, which means that HIV/STI prevention, care, and treatment must be part of sexual and reproductive health care, putting the most appropriate technologies and latest progress within the reach of the people. Above all, it is fundamental to make every effort with the community, closely coordinating with many other sectors, if we are to impact the structural and cultural factors that increase the vulnerability of individuals and affect the health of nations.

PAHO Provides Technical and Financial Support for the IV Latin American and Caribbean Forum

PAHO is providing support for the IV Latin American and Caribbean Forum on HIV/AIDS and STIs, scheduled for April in Argentina, in the form of financial and technical resources, considering the forum a timely opportunity to improve and exchange information and knowledge among the countries of the Region. PAHO Director Dr. Mirta Roses will participate in several forum activities, including the closing session.

During one of the forum's satellite sessions moderated by PAHO, the Regional HIV/SIT Plan for the Health Sector 2006-2015 will be discussed. The objective will be to facilitate a framework for strategic discussion on implementing the plan in the Region. Another PAHO activity will be the launching of "VIHdeo America," an anthology of experiences over the past 10 years with television announcements on HIV in the Americas.

The participation of the countries of the Region, mainly from the Caribbean, is key to the success of this forum, which is why PAHO has also devoted time to directly promoting the event with national HIV programs and civil society in Spanish-speaking and Caribbean countries through teleconferences and the new communication tool "Elluminate."

The technical support and/or materials that will be distributed at the forum by PAHO also include the report on public information campaigns against homophobia in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico; the report on HIV in the Americas; publications on HIV/AIDS prevention among young people; and the counseling model targeting young people to prevent HIV and promote sexual and reproductive health.

Some PAHO publications will also be available to forum participants, including the Regional HIV/STI Plan for the Health Sector 2006-2015; the manual for integrated management of drug users living with HIV/AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean; the training manual for primary care and community teams in Latin America and the Caribbean on integrated management of adults living with HIV/AIDS; understanding and responding to the stigma and discrimination in the health sector associated with HIV/AIDS; posters on stigma and discrimination; and the report on the elimination of congenital syphilis in Latin America.

Related links:

The forum's official website is:

<http://www.forovihsida2007.gov.ar/site/nota.asp?IdSeccion=3&IdNota=4>

To view the Regional HIV/STI Plan for the Health Sector 2006-2015, go to:

http://www.paho.org/Spanish/AD/FCH/AI/hiv_reg_plan.htm

Technical Network on Pediatric AIDS to be created

The integration of centers of excellence in managing HIV in infants and children through the formation of a technical network, as well as a regional proposal for collaboration to facilitate access to techniques for early diagnosis of HIV infection in babies with seropositive mothers, figure among the main topics to be discussed at the Pediatric AIDS forum on 21 April 2007, organized by PAHO. More than 50 experts in this area are expected to participate.

Following the conclusion of the IV Latin American and Caribbean Forum on HIV/AIDS and STIs, PAHO will take advantage of a meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina to present World Health Organization guidelines on the integrated management of children with HIV as a model to comprehensively meet the needs of affected families.

The scientific forum will be coordinated by PAHO in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the UNAIDS Secretariat, the Latin American Society for Pediatric Infectious Diseases (SLIPE), and the Latin American Pediatrics Association (ALAPE).

Those interested in receiving a technical report on this meeting can request one electronically from sida@paho.org

PAHO to Issue Report on Campaigns against Homophobia in Latin America

The public debate sparked by the initial campaigns against homophobia in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Argentina has been considered successful, even though their results have not been evaluated or their impact measured, according to a PAHO report that will be presented during the IV Latin American and Caribbean Forum on HIV/AIDS and STIs.

The report points out that the campaigns, which used radio spots, television announcements, and billboards on public thoroughfares, managed to surprise many people, disturb a few others, and generate a heated public debate that is helping to forever change the panorama of HIV prevention campaigns in Latin America.

"These campaigns were the natural result of the search for more effective mechanisms to prevent HIV in homosexual men," stated Mariângela Simão, Director of Brazil's National AIDS Program.

Even though the Global Fund and other organizations and agencies, such as PAHO, provided funding, most of the money for the campaigns came from the governments, with a total cost of approximately \$6 million—a small sum, if one hopes to successfully tackle a taboo issue of such magnitude in countries that represent 70% of Latin America's population.

Related link: <http://www.paho.org/Spanish/AD/FCH/AI/homofobia.pdf>

Evaluation of the Health System's Response to HIV in the Dominican Republic

At the request of the Dominican Republic's Ministry of Public Health, PAHO/WHO, in

collaboration with UNICEF, the UNAIDS Secretariat, and other agencies, conducted an external evaluation of the national health system's response to the HIV epidemic to identify strengths and weaknesses, determine the relevance of the response, evaluate the progress and scope of activities in prevention and care, and offer recommendations to improve comprehensive universal access.

The evaluation, seen by many as an innovative endeavor in the Region because of its combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, assessed the effectiveness of the resources invested in terms of national goals; used tracking elements to identify gaps; and identified factors that impede effective implementation of national policy in the different spheres of the health system.

One of the main findings of the multidisciplinary team of international and national experts that conducted the evaluation was that, despite the country's high level of investment and performance in implementing several projects, significant gaps in coverage persist.

Moreover, the evaluation found evidence of the need to improve national processes that can ensure coordination and coherence between identified priorities, available resources, and health system reforms at all levels with cost-effectiveness and sustainability criteria.

In addition to its contribution to the national strategic management and decision-making process, the evaluation will help strengthen collaboration among the different agencies of the United Nations system, particularly those with a direct role in the health sector's response (PAHO/WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNAIDS). The evaluation also will facilitate dialogue with external financing agencies in order to advocate an approach that addresses public health and the strengthening of health systems. In response to the lessons learned, PAHO/WHO will make a conceptual reference and methodological report available to the rest of the countries for subsequent use with the necessary adaptations.

PAHO and UNAIDS Coordinate Joint Activities in the Region

Positioning the Regional HIV/STI Plan for the Health Sector 2006-2015, promoting and supporting international opportunities and meetings that generate and share knowledge, and strengthening the programs for surveillance of the epidemic in the countries of the Region are part of the agreements reached during the recent visit to PAHO Headquarters of the new UNAIDS Regional Director for Latin America, César Nuñez, in late February. The objective was to harmonize technical and financial cooperation in the Region between the two agencies.

Key areas of the joint cooperation framework between UNAIDS and PAHO will be pediatric AIDS, epidemiological and behavioral surveillance, HIV prevention, resource mobilization, the use of communications technologies (communities of practice), development of national strategic plans, efforts to fight stigma and discrimination, and the primary health care perspective approach to HIV.

Training Instructors in IMAI in Haiti

The initial training in Integrated Management of Adult and Adolescent Illness (IMAI) for a group of instructors was conducted last November in Haiti, with the participation of staff from various institutions and nongovernmental organizations working in HIV training in the country. After the course ended, the instructors put their knowledge into practice by conducting the first training activities for first-level health workers.

Training also was provided to auxiliary instructors selected from counselors who work in different counseling centers in Port-au-Prince, as well as to a group of nurses selected from 12 health centers from five of the country's departments.

The next steps include implementation of the IMAI strategy in these departments in collaboration with local partners and developing a monitoring and support system to link the primary care centers with the country's existing HIV centers.

The training of 26 health "multipliers" and 33 health workers was conducted by a group of WHO experts from Geneva, Burkina Faso, and Senegal.

Guatemala: Launch of a National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS

Guatemala has the first National Strategic Plan (PEN 2006-2010), developed within the framework of the Regional HIV/STI Plan for the Health Sector and supported by PAHO, beginning with its implementation, validation, publication, launch, and dissemination among different sectors of the country such as health, education, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, and international agencies.

The plan, which approaches the epidemic comprehensively through elements related to prevention, diagnosis, and care, contains a component known as the "Health Education Plan," which constitutes one of the major achievements coordinated with the Ministry of Education. PAHO is supporting the implementation of the plan through training workshops on sexual and reproductive health geared to decision-makers, service providers, directors of Ministry of Health and Education programs, and the team of the National Strategic Plan, with technical support from sexologist Angela Martínez of the American Jewish World Service.

Mexico: International Forum Held on State-of-the-Art Prevention of HIV

In order to review the progress made in reducing exposure to risk and the transmission of HIV and to propose strategies for keeping the issue on the public agenda with financial backing, a meeting was held with representatives from the health sector and civil society of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Peru, and the 31 states and Federal District of Mexico.

The meeting, held in March in Mexico City, underscored the need to develop and keep the capacity of multidisciplinary teams responsible for prevention activities in their countries up to date. Regarding technological advances such as male circumcision, microbicides, and other scientific developments, it was proposed that regional technical consultations be held to review recommendations in the Latin American context and suggest modifications and adaptations that would lend relevance to the international recommendations.

During the international forum, there was a specific request to support national responses through capacity building in systematic planning, which includes the monitoring and evaluation of prevention and promotion activities in the field of sexual health, as well as the preparation of technical reports to disseminate lessons learned and best practices.

As part of the meeting, the PAHO Representative Office in Mexico and the Secretariat of Health offered participants a visit to the Center for Research on Infectious Diseases of the National Institute of Respiratory Diseases. The purpose of the visit was to explore the

possibility of assisting countries in the training of human resources and in diagnostic and operations research technologies.

PAHO Headquarters HIV Unit on Working Retreat

In order to review the regional status of the epidemic and identify new challenges and opportunities within the context of the new regional plan, the team of the HIV Unit at PAHO Headquarters held a working retreat in January.

The retreat made it possible to analyze the team's individual and group competencies, the functions that would have to be adopted to handle the HIV Unit's new responsibilities, and the level of consistency between the work of the unit and the regional plan, with a view to making strategic adjustments in both work plans and monitoring and evaluation for 2007.

PAHO's HIV Focal Points at Subregional Meetings

To review the implementation of the Regional HIV/STI Plan for the Health Sector 2006-2015, discuss subregional plans, and effectively coordinate the work in the Region, PAHO's HIV Unit met with its Focal Points and subregional advisers during the initial months of 2007.

The meetings—held in Trinidad and Tobago for the Caribbean subregion, in El Salvador for the Central America subregion, and in Colombia for the countries of the South American region—discussed the preparations for the meeting of the Technical Advisory Committee on HIV/AIDS, to be held soon in Jamaica, and the use of new technologies such as teleconferences and video conferences, training sessions, and virtual meetings through “Elluminate” in order to intensify and improve communication in the Region.

PAHO Concludes Round of HIV Training for its Staff

After 28 training sessions as part of its new human resources policy on HIV in the workplace, PAHO managed to train 77% of its Headquarters staff about the risks of HIV transmission, the behaviors and practices associated with HIV, its mode of transmission, and the struggle against stigma and discrimination.

Evaluations were conducted before and after the training to measure the knowledge of staff. Staff were informed about facilities where information on HIV and/or HIV counseling can be obtained, and they were given the opportunity to get tested for HIV.

PAHO's HIV policy includes providing information to staff about access to post-exposure prophylaxis kits, promoting HIV testing along with counseling, providing access to male and female condoms, and distributing the United Nations' pamphlet “Living in a World with HIV and AIDS.”

The new PAHO policy complements efforts by the United Nations system to safeguard the health of all staff and promote greater and better knowledge about HIV and its consequences.

The human resources policy on HIV in the workplace, which was authorized by the Director in July 2006, covers all staff who work for the Organization, regardless of the type of contract that they have.

To view the full policy, go to:

http://unworkplace.unaids.org/UNAIDS/common/docs/GIB_HIV-Aids_HR_policy_ENG.pdf

PAHO Staff Movements

- *Patricio Rojas* was named by the Director of PAHO as the new Chief, a.i. of PAHO's HIV Unit in Washington, D.C. Mr. Rojas served as PAHO Representative in Nicaragua from 2000 and 2005. Prior to that he worked more than 20 years for WHO in various sub-Saharan African countries, which enabled him to witness first-hand the spread of the epidemic on that continent.
- *Jorge Bermúdez*, Chief of PAHO's Essential Medicines, Vaccines, and Health Technologies Unit, has been named Executive Secretary of UNITAID, an international initiative to facilitate the procurement of drugs and diagnostic media to combat HIV. UNITAID is an initiative of the governments of Brazil, Chile, Norway, France, and the United Kingdom. Its objective is to create innovative ways to mobilize financial resources.

For more information on UNITAID, go to:

<http://www.unaids.org/en/MediaCentre/PressMaterials/FeatureStory/20060920-unitaid.asp>

Most Frequently Used HIV Acronyms

http://www.paho.org/English/AD/FCH/AI/Acronym_hivAIDS.pdf

PAHO is the regional office of WHO in the Americas and a co-sponsor of UNAIDS.

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