

## New Release

### Ministry of Health Detects 20 New HIV Cases

**November 2020 THIMPHU-BHUTAN:** In the last six months from June-Nov 2020 the Ministry of Health has detected 20 new HIV cases (10 male and 10 female). The majority (95%, n=17) of them are between the age range of 25-49 years old and (15%, n=3) above 50 years. Among the new cases by occupational group, 6 each belong to private/business and housewives, 3 from uniformed personnel, 2 each from civil servants and farmers and 1 is a driver. In terms of mode of transmission, all 20 of them have acquired the infection through unprotected heterosexual and there is no Mother to Child Transmission (MTCT) reported. Among the new cases, 12 of them were diagnosed through Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT), 4 from medical screening and 3 belongs to contact tracing and one through the antenatal clinic respectively. Currently, all the new cases are being put on care and treatment at the JDWNRH. A total of 54 HIV cases has been diagnosed in 2020 alone.

*Her Excellency the Hon'ble Health Minister said "We are committed to strive harder in making people know their HIV status through innovative means of HIV testing services and quality care, support and treatment. One such measure is that the Ministry of Health will introduce HIV Self Testing (HIVST) as a part of the community-led testing and then roll out new medicines for HIV/AIDS". Hon'ble Lyonpo added, "Advantages with HIVST also comes with some disadvantages such as the risk of false-negative results and false reassurance during the acute infection, insufficient counselling and possible delayed entry into care and treatment if one doesn't adhere to the HIVST protocol of the Ministry of Health". Hon'ble Lyonpo also mentioned that the shared responsibility is important in our overall response towards HIV/AIDS because such cooperation and support from the stakeholders in the past has made good progress towards elimination of Mother to Child Transmission (eMTCT) of HIV, Syphilis and Hepatitis B. The Ministry of Health is working towards validating the eMTCT to enable Bhutan to declare its Zero MTCT of HIV, Syphilis and Hepatitis B in the region at the earliest possible and work for validation exercises are underway".*

*The Director, Department of Public Health, Dr Karma Lhazeen said: "We have seen how the COVID-19 crisis has worsened the challenges faced by people living with HIV, women and girls and key populations like female sex workers, men having sex with men and transgender populations due to the loss of their income and difficulty in accessing the health care services" She further added "this crisis has also been a wake-up call, an opportunity to do things differently better, and together. In many respects, AIDS as a public health threat can be overcome if we seriously apply T 3 of COVID-19 (Test Treat and Track)" said Dr karma Lhazeen.*

The Ministry of Health will be rolling out the HIVST in six major urban districts (Thimphu, Paro, Phuentsholing, Gelephu, S/Jongkhar and Samtse) of Bhutan. The Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Save the Children Bhutan through the support of the Global Fund Regional Grant is in the process of developing the necessary guidelines and protocols for the HIVST and community lead testing. The Ministry of Health is also working closely with different stakeholders ranging from government to NGOs and financial institutions for the economic

empowerment of the marginalized key populations by building their knowledge and skills in entrepreneurship to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

Since 1993-until Dec 2020, of the estimated 1300 HIV cases, the Ministry of Health has diagnosed 741 (384 male and 357 Female) Cases. However, we still need to find 559 missing cases to bridge the current detection gap of 43%. Like many other countries in the region, the majority (70%) of the reported HIV cases in Bhutan is between the age range of 25-49 years old while 14% are between 15-24 years old and the remaining 5% below 15 years of age and then 10% above 50 years. This shows that HIV in Bhutan has primarily affected the most economically productive age group. About 93.9% of them have acquired HIV infection through the heterosexual route, 5.3% from mother to child transmission (MTCT), 0.4% each from Injecting Drug Use and blood transfusion (Outside Bhutan).

HIV-related stigma and discrimination refer to prejudice, negative attitudes and abuse directed at people living with HIV and AIDS. Stigma and discrimination can largely discourage a vulnerable group of people to show up for testing. The key affected populations or those most at risk of getting HIV continues to face stigma and discrimination based on their actual or perceived health status, race, socioeconomic status, age, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity or other grounds. Such stigma and discrimination which is the number one cause for HIV transmission and socio-psycho issues among those living with the virus. The likelihood of occurring stigma and discrimination in health care settings is also high, barring people from accessing health services or enjoying quality health care. Such a dogmatic social stigma and discrimination should be subdued and adequate support should be provided to enable people to know their HIV status and improve the quality of life. We have scientifically well-proven effective HIV medicine that can reduce HIV in the body and improve their immune system to stay healthy and live a long life like any other uninfected individual. However, we must know that timely testing is the only means to know your HIV status to initiate early treatment to prevent you from getting full-blown AIDS at a later stage. This year World AIDS Day 2020 will be observed on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 at the Hotel Le-Méridien, Thimphu.

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*For any clarification please call*

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