

Jamaica to eliminate mom-to-child infection by 2015

A campaign to get pregnant women in Jamaica tested for HIV and protect their babies has yielded fruit, with over 90 per cent doing checks. Mother-to-child transmission of HIV has declined from 25 per cent in 2002 to less than five per cent last year.

But Dr Kevin Harvey, director of the National HIV/STI Programme, is aiming for even greater results.

"The goal is elimination of mother-to-child HIV and syphilis by 2015, not just in Jamaica, but also in the Caribbean," said Harvey.

The programme director has acknowledged that the target would be difficult to attain.

"It's always difficult to reach 100 per cent of anything but, certainly, we should be below two per cent."

Success so far

He said the mother-to-child campaign has been successful and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has revised its guidelines to adopt the model being used in Jamaica and other countries. Harvey told The Gleaner that the campaign - geared towards getting mothers more informed about HIV and tested for the virus - started in 2003. Additionally, he said free medication has been administered since 2002, long before the removal of user fees at the island's hospitals.

The antiretroviral prophylactic drug is administered from 14 weeks of pregnancy to delivery. He said if the mother's CD4 count was below 350, the treatment would continue after the child was born. (See definition of CD4 in story above.)

Fear of stigmatism

Despite the success, Harvey pointed to the practice of some expectant mothers who do not disclose their HIV status for various reasons, including fear of stigma-tisation and, therefore, are not issued medication.

"What we find, even if they don't tell you themselves during the delivery, immediately after, they will tell you that the baby needs to get some medication, so the baby ends up getting it, and we have a higher coverage among the babies," said Harvey.

Meanwhile, a report prepared by the Office of the Children's Advocate and UNICEF, in commemorating 20 years of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, gave statistics for Jamaican youth.

Children refusing treatment

The report indicated that close to 10 per cent of reported AIDS cases in Jamaica were among children under 18, and 20 per cent among young people aged 20-29 years.

"An estimated 20,000 children are affected by AIDS, of whom approximately 5,000 are orphaned," the report read.

Harvey said the main challenge in the fight against HIV/AIDS in children was resistance by adolescents who were medicated while growing up but later rebelled against the regimen, particularly as they grappled with sexual urges during puberty.

He said the health ministry was creating a comprehensive pro-gramme to address the group, as there was no specific plan to target them. Additionally, he said there are family clinics, psychologists and counsellors that are being put in place.