

HIV/AIDS in the Cook Islands

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Introduction

The Cook Islands consist of 15 islands, scattered over more than 2 million sq km of the south-west Pacific Ocean. It has a total population of 18552 with 10198 living in Rarotonga, the administrative centre. The Ministry of Health assisted by WHO started AIDS prevention programme in 1988. A Short Term Plan was developed in 1988 followed by a Medium Term Plan (MTP) for 1990-1994. In April and May 1994, a program review took place to assess the AIDS prevention program activities.

Nature and extent of HIV/AIDS problems

To date, the Cook Islands has reported no HIV infections. There were a couple of incidences in which tourists had revealed their positive HIV status to health workers while receiving medical care in Rarotonga.

HIV antibody test by PA Method (Serodia) was introduced in the country in 1987. Since then HIV screening has been done for blood donors, ante-natal women, STD patients and some outpatients upon request at Rarotonga Hospital, the only facility capable of HIV test in the country. The majority of the test in the past have been performed on donated blood and samples drawn in the ante-natal clinics. No specific HIV sero-surveillance studies for high risk groups have been conducted. The total number of HIV tests performed in the past six years is as shown on Table 1.

Although geographical isolation from the rest of the world may have protected the islands from HIV transmission, Cook Islands has close contact with New Zealand, Australia and other countries with higher prevalence. Life style and traditional values have gone

through rapid changes in recent years especially among young Cook Islanders. Since substantial number of Cook Islanders live overseas, it is more likely that the HIV infected Cook Islanders living overseas could return to spend the last part of their lives in their home islands in the near future.

In 1993 a survey to assess the health workers knowledge and attitudes on HIV/AIDS was conducted. In March and April a KABP survey on HIV/AIDS among the general public was conducted by the staff of the Health Education Unit and some Public Health Nurses. There have been no studies done on sexual behaviour of the population so far. The results of these studies have not been published.

Strategies and intervention to prevent HIV infection

The three major activity areas in the provision of information, education and communication are: awareness raising and education of the general public; promotion of safe/safer sexual behaviours to potential high risk people; and education of school aged youth. The National AIDS Committee (NAC) oversee the plans and strategies for HIV-related interventions.

Awareness raising and education of the general public:

Awareness activities targeted towards the general public has been effective. This has been achieved primarily through regular radio and periodic TV programs. Outer Islands have been reached with printed materials, mostly newspaper articles, posters and pamphlets. The following activities warrant special mention:

- World AIDS Day is planned as a whole week activity by the NAC. Activities range from banners, parades, drama, song competition along with radio and television programs and newspapers articles.
- Workshop and seminars in Rarotonga and the Outer Islands provided training for health workers, church, women, and youth group leaders on HIV/AIDS and ways to prevent transmission. Certain

health staff and some NAC members also attended overseas training workshops. Many of these have been assisted by the South Pacific Commission.

- Pamphlets and posters about AIDS prevention, condoms use, STD and safe sex have been produced and distributed. Some of these materials are in the vernacular.

Year	Number tested
1989	357
1990	283
1991	821
1992	860
1993	729
1994	678
Total	3728

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- Large billboards at the airport and the centre of the Avarua advise tourists and residents to keep "Paradise AIDS Free" and "To Act Responsibly". The tourist bureau advertises the Cook Islands in the international markets as "AIDS FREE".
- In 1993 Tereora College, the main college in Rarotonga in co-operation with the Health Education Unit produced a 30 minute video tape on HIV/AIDS called "Fading Away". This has been widely shown nationally and regionally. Copies may be obtained from the South Pacific Commission or Ministry of Health.

Risk groups: It is difficult to identify the at risk people to educate about safe behaviours. However the health education staff have worked with some hotels, bars and night clubs to provide information and materials. AIDS education sessions has also been conducted with the prison inmates. It is planned to hold AIDS Seminars with the "Akavaine group" (the equals of the faafafine in Western Samoa and fakafafine or fakaleiti in Tonga).

School aged groups: Another target group is the school aged youths. A HIV/AIDS curriculum was developed by the Education Curriculum Unit in 1991. In April 1995 the Teacher Training HIV/AIDS Workshop was held. To date this curriculum is not implemented but the Health Education Section is providing AIDS education in the schools. The Health Education staff have developed a set of policies related to HIV/AIDS - but have not yet been approved by the NAC.

Condoms procurement and distribution: Condoms are available free of charge from the Government Pharmacy. Condoms can be purchased from two other private chemists in Rarotonga. A pamphlet on "How to use Condoms" was developed and translated to the Maori language. These are given out with the condoms.

Prevention of HIV transmission through blood: Action to reduce the need for blood transfusion is done by early intervention to the problem e.g. maternal anemia through ante-natal services. Promotion of safe blood supply for transfusion is by means of rational use of blood. Donor recruitment is carried out by the laboratory staff with the

assistance of the Red Cross Society. Blood donors are mostly family members of the patient. In case of emergency a few units of blood are stored in the Blood Bank. Screening of blood products is routinely done for HIV, Hepatitis B and VDRL. To keep the HIV tests confidential, a coding system is used. However the recording in the log book system is not satisfactory as the code is entered with the patient's name and the book is accessible to anybody in the laboratory. It is recommended that HIV test coding should be done by the requesting medical officer to ensure confidentiality

"There is no HIV/AIDS related legislation in the country [Cook Islands] as yet."

Promote safer drug use behaviour: There has been no report of injecting drug use in the country.

Promotion of sterile conditions: In health care settings there has been no infection control guidelines. However, health workers appear to follow universal precautions. Disposal devices are used and equipment are properly disposed. Regular supplies of equipment and sterilisation are problems especially in the outer islands. Tattooing and other traditional customs do not seem to be of significant importance.

Prevention of perinatal transmission: Routine ante-natal services include HIV testing. However no pre-and post-test counselling is provided.

Conclusion

The provision and access to health care services for HIV infected persons has been promoted by awareness raising among health workers. This has been a priority area in the AIDS programme. Health workers have had training workshops on all issues. Home or community care for HIV infected persons has been discussed in every community AIDS education workshops. However, without a case of HIV infection, it may be difficult to deal with the issue realistically. There is no HIV/AIDS related legislation in the country as yet. The Ministry of Health is the leader of the national effort on HIV/AIDS prevention, development of appropriate legislations and care of any AIDS patients in the future.

References

References are available from the authors on request. □

"I'm just a concerned, caring Christian carrying condoms for Christ!"

Dr Passingan Usurup, PNG, answering criticisms about distributing condoms to soldiers