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Lack of awareness and unified strategy fuels HIV epidemic among men who have sex with men in Asia Pacific

Media invited to attend full-day forum at ICAAP 9 on the misunderstood and socially complex issue of HIV infection among MSM in the region, and strategies for prevention and containment.

BALI - The Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM) will conduct a full-day forum on August 8 on the unique challenges posed by HIV infection among men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgenders (TG) in the region. The interactive consultation is an official pre-conference activity of the 9th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP 9) being held in Bali. Authorities from around the world armed with the latest epidemiological data will provide important new insights into the directions the epidemic is taking in the region.

Every 7.5 minutes in Asia Pacific, a man who has sex with men, irrespective of their being homosexual or heterosexual, gets infected with HIV. APCOM, a regional coalition focusing on HIV and MSM of community-based organisations that includes the government sector and the United Nations system, will target its day-long forum squarely on this key affected population. It will bring together a diverse mix of experts, from developers of national HIV response programmes to scientific researchers to those involved in the UN's global and regional response to HIV among MSM and TG. They are joined by community leaders from the Asia Pacific region involved in local, national and sub-regional service delivery and community mobilization.

Asia Pacific faces a number of hurdles that make HIV prevention among MSM particularly difficult, including religious and cultural attitudes, legal, economic and social discrimination, linguistic challenges and varying levels of awareness. Highly concentrated and severe HIV epidemics among MSM in urban areas across the region are well documented, yet investment in HIV programming for MSM and TG remains limited, ranging from 0% to 4% of the total spending for HIV programming in countries region-wide.

Several major cities across the region are now experiencing HIV epidemics among men who have sex with men. Recently released data from Myanmar, for example, shows the estimated HIV prevalence rate among MSM in Yangon to be hovering near 30%. In Bangkok, it is 30.7%, Phnom Penh 8.7%, Mumbai 9.6%, and Beijing 5.8%.

“Most other major Asian cities still have a window of opportunity to avoid serious epidemics among men who have sex with other men and transgenders – but that window will soon be shut unless investment and programming are rapidly put in place to change people’s thinking about condoms and safe sex,” said APCOM Chairperson Shivananda Khan, OBE. “This kind of transformation cannot be achieved without the help of the government and mass media. APCOM is conducting the forum in Bali to share information on where we now stand, what the outlook is for the future, and what governments and stakeholders can do right now to address the devastating epidemics in Asia Pacific.”

The roster of experts speaking at the August 8 forum constitutes the “A list” of authorities on HIV in Asia Pacific and the unique prevention challenges faced by MSM and TG communities. The list includes:

- Kevin Frost, Executive Director of the Foundation for AIDS Research, renowned for his assistance to Asia Pacific’s medical sector for more than a decade, during which time he helped build capacity by implementing a vast network of medical facilities and NGOs for scaling up access to HIV treatment and prevention in the region.
- Jeff O'Malley, heads the UNDP’s Global HIV programme and was the founding Executive Director of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance; he was largely responsible for making HIV infection among MSM one of the top priorities of UNDP globally and in Asia Pacific.
- Frits Van Griensven, a leading epidemiologic and behavioural research at the US CDC in Thailand; his pioneering work in the Greater Mekong sub-region, starting in Thailand, gave invaluable insights into regional prevalence rates among the region’s MSM and TG communities

These and other speakers will present the latest epidemiological data and surveys, and will also examine how the crisis affects all of society in Asia Pacific, not only the MSM communities at risk of infection.

“HIV among MSM and TG is not just a health care crisis in our region; it is also a development crisis,” said Edmund Settle, UNDP HIV Policy Advisor for Asia-Pacific, and a UN Technical Advisor to APCOM. “Looming epidemics in Asia Pacific’s developing countries can lead to significant societal tensions that obstruct development, consume resources and diminish opportunities.”

Now in its second year, APCOM is a regional coalition of MSM and HIV community-based organizations, the government sector, donors, technical experts and the UN system. Its main purpose is to advocate for political support and increased investment in and coverage of HIV services in Asia Pacific. APCOM promotes principles of good practice and lessons learnt by bringing together representatives from diverse groups in an effort to share experience, knowledge and expertise. Additional information is available at www.msmasia.org.

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Special Invitation to Journalists:

The APCOM forum just before 9th ICAAP on August 8 will provide an outstanding opportunity for the media to receive the latest Asia Pacific-specific information on this urgent subject and to participate in what promises to be a spirited and dynamic forum. Those who wish to attend should send an email to 200forum@msmasia.org. We will respond promptly to all requests.