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AIDS Awareness Among the School Children of Bahawalpuria Community of Patiala (Punjab)

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INTRODUCTION

The AIDS (Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome) pandemic has claimed innumerable lives since the disease was first described in early 1980's. Globally an estimated 36 million people are currently living with HIV (Human Immuno Deficiency Virus) but the worst of the epidemic centered on sub-saharan Africa (Piot et al., 2001).

In India about 3.7 million adults are estimated to be infected with HIV/AIDS, barely second to south Africa. Some 3,500 Indians are contracting HIV everyday. By 2005, 5 per cent of the adults could be infected if adequate preventive measures are not taken (Dube, 2000). Out of the two serotypes, HIV-1, occurs frequently all over the world whilst HIV-2 is prevalent in W. Africa and has spread to Europe and India and is almost indistinguishable from SIV (Simian Immunodeficiency Virus) that infects sooty mangabey monkeys (The Durban Declaration Nature, 2001). HIV behaves like a parasite and replicates within the living host. It has nine genes and belongs to the lentivirus genus of retroviruses. It carries two RNA copies of its genome within the virus particle. Viral reverse transcriptase converts them to one DNA copy within the infected cell which enables HIV to get integrated in the host DNA and use the cell's genetic machinery to make a new virus. Reverse transcriptase was the first target of antiviral drugs in clinical use, second being protease enzymes (Richmann, 2001). Other targets for anti-HIV drug development include interaction with cell surface receptors and integration of the viral DNA into host chromosomal DNA. HIV mainly infects the T-helper lymphocytes at their CD_4 antigen. Chemokin receptor (i.e. co-receptors) guide the viral envelope glycoproteins into a conformation permitting membrane fusion and entry into the cell. Besides CD_4 lymphocytes, macrophages and dendritic cells also harbour HIV. High levels of virus replication and cell destruction occur at all stages of infection, although it takes years before CD_4^+ cells count falls below the threshold for symptomatic immunodeficiency to manifest itself (Weiss, 2001).

There is considerable expense and logistical difficulty in providing antiviral drugs to population infected with HIV throughout the world, the biomedical community is looking forward towards vaccines to help and solve this compelling problem (Nabel, 2001). To tackle AIDS, prevention is the most effective and cheapest way out that must be given worldwide public health priority. Prevention of HIV/AIDS is possible through awareness and behavioural changes. In this critical endeavour both government and civil societies must work together to spread the awareness among those who need it most. The present study was therefore conducted to check the level of AIDS awareness among the school children belonging to Bahawalpuria community of Patiala and to educate them about the devasting consequences of the disease that causes a lot of suffering and loss of life.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The sample comprised of 250 school children of Bahawalpuria community falling in the age group of 13 to 18 years studying in 8^{th} to 10+2 classes in Tripuri township, a suburb of Patiala. The students were mainly from arts faculty. Out of the total sample 130 were females and the rest males.

To find out the level of AIDS awareness amongst the students a questionnaire was prepared. The information was sought about a number of parameters listed in the questionnaire which included, routes of transmission, high risk groups, cure and its prevention. Each and every term used in the proforma was explained to the students so that they were able to fill it accurately. After collection of proformas a lecture was delivered explaining each and every aspect of the dreadful disease to make them aware using specially prepared coloured charts for this purpose.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the students first came to know about AIDS as early as in the 8th standard since the topic was a part of curriculum/ syllabii in many schools, however very few of them could expand AIDS and HIV i.e. were unable to give the full forms. Still it was encouraging to observe that some 82.2 per cent of the students mentioned the virus as the causative agent (Table 1).

Table 1: AIDS awareness - causative agent

Causative agent	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
Virus	207	82.8
Bacteria	37	14.8
Any Other	6	2.4

As far as the first source of information is concerned 95.2 per cent of the students mentioned television as an important and best source of information followed by friends and teachers to increase awareness about AIDS in the population (Table 2).

Table 2: AIDS awareness - first source of information

First source of information	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
TV	238	95.2
Friends	7	2.8
News Paper	2	0.8
Teacher	3	1.2

It was heartening to observe that approximately 25.2 per cent of the students were aware of all the possible routes of transmission, however many had misconceived ideas regarding the transmission of AIDS (Table 3).

Table 3: AIDS awareness - route of transmission

Route	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
Sexual contact with HIV infected person	190	76
Infected syringe/needle	177	70.8
Transfusion of HIV through infected blood	214	85.6
Instruments used for piercing nose/ear at the barber's shop	32	12.8
All the above	63	25.2

Majority of the students i.e. above 80 per cent were aware that the children of the affected parents and female sex workers are at a higher risk but very few (22.8 per cent) had the knowledge that homosexuals also come under this category (Table 4).

Table 4: AIDS awareness - high risk groups

High risk groups	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
Female sex workers	134	53.6
Frequent blood recipients	206	82.4
Children of affected parents	107	42.8
Drug addicts	143	57.2
Homosexual	57	22.8

It was also observed that more males admitted discussing AIDS among them, than the females, the reason being the hesitant nature of the females.

Almost all the students considered it their duty to inform youngsters or friends about the consequences of AIDS so that people can take preventive measures which can prove beneficial for the society.

About 63.2 per cent students stated that HIV could also be transmitted both prenatally as well as postnatally however 1.6 per cent of the students did not respond at all (Table 5).

Table 5: AIDS awareness - transmission of HIV through affected mother

Route	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
Prenatal	75	30
Postnatal through mother's milk	13	5.2
Both	158	63.2
No response	4	1.6

84.4 per cent of the students were aware of the fact that till today there is no effective cure for AIDS (Table 6). Only 34 per cent of the students were aware of all the precautions to be taken to avoid AIDS (Table 7).

Table 6: AIDS awareness - cure / treatment

Cure / Treatment	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
Medicine	12	4.8
Vaccine	16	6.4
Both	11	4.4
No cure	211	84.4

However, it was encouraging to observe that most of the students were aware of AIDS. The credit for this awareness goes to media and

Table 7: AIDS awareness - precautions to be taken

Routes	*Number of students*	*Per cent*
Safe blood transfusion	225	90.0
Sterlized syringes/needles	196	78.4
Monogamous matings	109	43.6
Safe sex	192	76.8
All the above	85	34.0

teachers in the school. But wide variations were observed regarding the level of awareness.

Most of the people belonging to Bahawalpuria community are illiterate, although today they have realized the importance of education and the younger section of the society is getting proper education. Thus, the lack of education among parents of majority of the students greatly influenced the level of awareness about the disease among them.

KEY WORDS: AIDS. Awareness. Survey.

ABSTRACT The present survey was an attempt to check the level of AIDS awareness among the students, belonging to Bahawalpuria community, studying at the schools located in Tripuri township, a suburb of Patiala. The sample comprised of 250 students ranging in age from 13-18 years. A questionnaire prepared especially for this purpose dealing with different aspects of AIDS was prepared and the students were asked to fill it independently. It was observed that a very low percentage of the students were aware of the full form of AIDS/ HIV however, 82.8 per cent students mentioned virus as the causative agent. Certain myths and misconceptions prevailed regarding HIV transmission. Majority of the students were aware that there is no cure but a few had some misconceptions. Only 34 per cent students were aware of all the precautions to be taken to avoid AIDS.

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