Call to Action

WCMC-Q professor urges new policies to face the threat of HIV

In 2008, nearly three million people worldwide were newly infected with HIV. But while the epidemic has spread to nearly every part of the globe, one region—the Middle East and North Africa—has long been thought to have been spared. There, the spread of HIV has been slower than in any other part of the world, with just 35,000 new cases in 2008—leading some researchers to believe that the region has successfully avoided the epidemic. However, a seven-year study led by WCMC-Q assistant professor of public health Laith Abu-Raddad, PhD, has documented that while the spread of HIV is rather limited in the region, there are nascent epidemics emerging among key populations at risk. “Unfortunately,” says the Jordan-born Abu-Raddad, “policies have not changed to face the reality of HIV spread in this part of the world.”

Abu-Raddad and a team of researchers collected data from many sources, including the scientific literature, NGOs, country-level reports, and international-organization reports. They discovered that while the infection rate of the general population has indeed remained quite low, HIV is spreading among select populations. They include men who have sex with men, IV drug users, and female sex workers and their clients. Because of the region’s socio-cultural fabric—and the association between high-risk behaviors and HIV infection—it has been difficult for governments to work with these groups and address HIV transmission among them. Cultural stigma also tend to make HIV-positive people reluctant to seek help or use protective measures like condoms, despite the fact that the virus is often passed on through socially acceptable behaviors such as marital sex. “The impression,” says Abu-Raddad, “is that if someone has the infection, they must have engaged in some behavior that is not accepted by society.” And since the general public has not yet been greatly affected, he notes, many governments have been reluctant to invest in large-scale prevention programs among the key populations exposed to HIV.

Abu-Raddad’s report, “Characterizing the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the Middle East and North Africa: Time for Strategic Action,” was published in June. It calls on countries in the region to focus their resources on those at highest risk. “We need prevention programs for people who are facing the threat of HIV infection,” says Abu-Raddad. “Let’s put the money where the needs are.”

— Adrienne Zable