

Bahrain takes the lead: Aids survey soon

A NEW study that can help determine the causes of HIV-AIDS in the country will be undertaken soon by the United Nations Development Programme and the Ministry of Health.

The survey will help launch a new awareness drive in Bahrain. The survey which takes off after Ramadhan will cover pregnant women, intravenous drug users and youth aged 15-24.

"The survey will help us formulate and implement a national strategy on HIV-AIDS," said Prof. Mary Deeb, UNDP project consultant. The project is the first to be conducted by the programme in a GCC country.

The survey comes as part of a three-year \$300,000 fund programme on HIV-



Dr Al Alloush announces the initiative yesterday.

Picture – Biju Haridas

AIDS by UNDP for Bahrain. The ministry records that there are currently 23 persons with full-blown AIDS in the country apart from 97 persons with HIV. "UNDP and the ministry had signed an agreement last year which covers the AIDS programme.

"The objective is to contain the prevalence level of HIV-AIDS in Bahrain," said Ella Chirileanu, UNDP resident programme co-ordinator. The programme was for-

mally announced yesterday at the organisation's headquarters by its resident representative Dr. Khalid Alloush with the ministry national committee chairwoman on the illness Dr. Somaya Al Jowder and the head of the Bahrain Family Planning Association Dr. Tawfeeq Ali Naseeb. The actual study will be undertaken at different stages during three months.

Programme heads are tar-

getting to survey at least 300 pregnant women, 600 drug addicts and some 2,300 youth respondents. About 60 interviewers will be trained and prepared over the next few days to conduct the survey. The team will include at least 10 drug-rehabilitation specialists conducting the survey for intravenous drug users. "People still have their misconceptions about AIDS. The survey hopes to determine people's perceptions

and, hopefully, will also help us understand the risks in the spread of the disease in Bahrain.

"What we need are data on people's knowledge about the disease, their lifestyle and practices," Professor Deeb said. "We are coming up with a strategy but we need information and evidence-based data to guide us." Apart from HIV-AIDS, the ministry programme with UNDP includes joint undertakings on research and awareness programmes on hereditary blood diseases and non-communicable diseases. The UN reports that there are some 750,000 cases of the disease in the Arab region. According to the UN, there are more than 40 million people afflicted with disease, with about 15,000 people dying from the illness daily.

Aids warning!

By DALAL AL ALAWI

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HUNDREDS of people in Bahrain could be infected with Aids or HIV but do not know it, according to doctors. The worrying announcement was made yesterday at the launch of a \$300,000 (BD113,400) nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the killer disease.

Official figures show that 23 Bahrainis are known to be living with Aids, while 79 others are infected with the HIV virus.

However, health officials say the real figure could be eight times higher due to lack of awareness or because people are too scared to get tested.

"This is not an accurate number and the real figure could be up to eight times more," said National Sexually Transmitted Diseases Programme manager Dr Somaya Al Jowder.

"Some people don't even know that they have Aids because they're too scared to get tested and would rather have it and not know about it.

"Symptoms could take up to 10 years to show and these people could be infecting others without even knowing it."

Dr Al Jowder added that over 750,000 people are known to have Aids and HIV in the Arab world.

However, she warned the low number of cases in Bahrain should not give people a false sense of security. "Many countries have started out with low numbers of Aids and HIV cases, but which suddenly exploded," she said.

"There are no cures or vaccines for this disease and the only weapon we have against it is health education.

"We shouldn't remain silent until the problem gets out of control like countries in Africa and we must prevent it at its early stages."

Dr Al Jowder was speaking yesterday at the launch of the new Aids campaign, which will assess the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of Bahrainis on the disease.

It will be carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in collaboration with the Health Ministry and the Bahrain Family Planning Association (BFPA).

The three-year awareness campaign will include three surveys to evaluate the extent of Aids in the country, as well as establish more accurate figures on the number of people living with it.

UNDP programme adviser Ela Chirileanu said it was the first programme between the UNDP and a GCC country that studies the attitude of the population on Aids and HIV, as well as raising awareness.

"This pioneering programme affirms the country's leadership's support and commitment in battling this disease," she told a Press conference at UN House, in Manama.

"It will encourage others to follow by containing the level of Aids and HIV in their countries and provide care to those affected by it."

Meanwhile, UNDP consultant Mary Deeb stressed the need for people to co-operate on the sensitive issue of Aids and HIV.

"The situation in each country is different and the data we collect will form the basis of setting up prevention to combat this disease," she said.

"Most people say it's not their problem so they don't have to help out, but this is a wrong attitude to have."

The surveys will be conducted on three target groups consisting of 300 pregnant women, 2,300 young people aged 16 to 24 and 600 Injecting Drug Users (IDUs). Each study will take up to three months to finalise and participants will not be asked to provide their names to ensure confidentiality.

The survey on pregnant women will start next month in various private hospitals and clinics around the country.

A team from the Health Ministry will conduct the survey on drug addicts at the Psychiatric Hospital's IDUs clinic from December.

The BFPA will help conduct the survey among young people at various schools and universities in Bahrain from January.

Ms Deeb said questions on the youth survey would include background information, their exposure to the media and their behaviour in terms of sex and family planning.

"One of the important questions would be if they used contraception such as condoms, which is one of the most protective measures against the disease," she said.

"Participants will also be asked how much they know about the transmission of HIV.

"These are all basic questions asked on all HIV and Aids questionnaires."