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China faces up to HIV/AIDS epidemic

World AIDS day is marked by launch of huge public-awareness campaign

The Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao became the first senior member of the country's government to shake hands with an AIDS patient last week in a highly symbolic gesture that HIV activists hoped would mark the start of a more open approach to the disease.

After years of denials and cover-ups, China's leaders have been praised in recent months for their willingness to publicly discuss the formerly taboo topic. And on World AIDS day—Dec 1—the government, health workers, and media went a step further by launching the biggest HIV-awareness campaign the country has ever seen.

Wen set the tone of the campaign during a televised visit to Ditan Hospital in Beijing. With a red ribbon pinned to his chest, he grasped the hands of an AIDS patient and delivered a message that health workers have been waiting for years to hear from communist party leaders.

"You must have confidence. All of society cares about you", Wen told the AIDS patients. "We need care and love, equality, and opposition to prejudice."

The statement indicated the government's growing concern about the social and economic consequences of HIV/AIDS. Despite its rapid economic growth, China was always going to struggle to find the resources to stem the HIV epidemic, which has seen the

number of reported cases rise by 30% per year.

But the authorities' tendency towards secrecy and the resulting lack of public awareness have slowed efforts to control the spread of HIV. A large part of the problem is the lack of reliable data. The government estimates that 840 000 people are infected with HIV—a relatively small proportion of the country's 1.2 billion population—but the UN puts the number closer to 1.5 million, and some non-governmental organisations warn it could be more than double that.

Even these patchy statistics, however, are an improvement. Until last year, China insisted it had only 30 000 HIV cases, before making a dramatic 25-fold revision upwards. It now accepts UN forecasts that 10 million people could be infected by 2010 unless drastic action is taken soon.

International health workers praised Wen for getting the ball rolling. "This was like breaking the ice", said Joel Rehnstrom, the country coordinator for UNAIDS in China. "It's something that a lot of people working in the AIDS field inside China and outside have been hoping for and waiting for."

"This is a very important step forward", said Henk Bekedam, WHO's China representative. "The government is ready for action."

There were certainly signs on Dec 1 that the population

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"Use heart and action to fight against AIDS"

was being mobilised as never before. Health workers visited construction sites to warn migrant workers of the risks of the disease, students at Beijing University practised putting condoms on bananas, and a state-run television station began airing "Red Ribbon", China's first television drama about people with HIV.

The government says it will also ease the suffering of the 80 000 patients with full-blown AIDS. In a remarkable turnaround last month, the health minister Ga Qiang acknowledged the government was not doing enough to tackle the epidemic and promised to expand the policy of "four frees": free testing, free antiretroviral drugs, free care for HIV-infected mothers, and free education for AIDS orphans.

Sceptics caution, however, that the apparent change of heart may not last beyond World AIDS day, after which the government will struggle to find the resources it needs to keep its promises.

But optimists view the transformation in government thinking as a result of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) crisis, which underlined the

long-term economic costs of a weak health-care system.

There is still a long way to go to change public awareness of the disease, however. A recent poll by Futures Group Europe and Horizon Market Research found that 19.9% of respondents had never heard of HIV or AIDS. Only 21.4% knew they could be infected through sexual intercourse, and a mere 2.6% were aware that condoms minimised risk of transmission.

But while social taboos and cover-ups continue to block a full understanding of the disease, the government is increasingly willing to accept international help. In October, Marie Stopes International opened its first reproductive health clinic in Qingdao, Shandong province, and the US government's Global AIDS Program recently opened its first Beijing office.

"It is much easier to work with the authorities now", said Lily Liqing, of Marie Stopes International. "The government has made big strides this year, but there is so much more that needs to be done in terms of openness and education."

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