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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

HIV in Turkey, a country bridging the Islamic world and Europe

The last conference of the International AIDS Society in Kuala Lumpur in 2013 drew attention to the underestimated number of people with HIV/AIDS in Muslim countries. Turkey is located at the intersection of two continents, with the ancient city of Istanbul located in Europe and the larger part of the country, Anatolia, located in Asia. Turkey borders countries with high reported rates of sexually transmitted diseases. Three cases of HIV/AIDS were reported in Turkey in 1985, and the number of cases has increased ever since. According to Turkish Ministry of Health (MoH) data from 2012, there are 5137 HIV-positive cases and 1051 AIDS cases registered in Turkey [1]. During the last few decades, the primary focus of diagnostic, therapeutic and scientific work in Turkey was on Hepatitis B, C and D, and to lesser extent on HIV. Today, HIV/AIDS is considered to be an emerging disease in Turkey (Fig. 1). The reported prevalence data published by the MoH reveal that the HIV/AIDS rates in Turkey are relatively low compared to the hardest-hit countries. Here, most cases of HIV/AIDS can be observed in the 20–59 age group. Of people with HIV/AIDS, 72% are male and 28% are female. The transmission of HIV/AIDS in Turkey differs from Western Europe in that the main 2 routes of transmission are through heterosexual contact (48.9%) followed by homosexual contact (8.9%) whereas in Europe, HIV/AIDS is more frequently transmitted by risk behavior among homosexuals [1]. It should be noted that sex work is considered to be the major driver of the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV in Turkey [2]. The HIV/AIDS Control Programme in Turkey monitors HIV infection through 81 countrywide Provincial Health Directorates that are geographically distributed to represent all parts of the country. HIV/AIDS cases are reported to local health directorates and then to the MoH through a patient coding system after blood samples are confirmed by Western Blot in one of nine Confirmation Centres countrywide. The Department of

Medical Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine is one of three designated HIV confirmatory centers in the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul. The lab receives samples for confirmation from Istanbul and the outlying areas. Between January 2005 and December 2011, a total of 1980 HIV-suspected serum samples were tested by HIV-ELISA and 178 cases were confirmed by Western Blot at this center. The HIV/AIDS diagnosis laboratory has the highest capacity for routine viral load testing in the country.

In Turkey, HIV drug-resistance testing (DRT) is still mainly performed in scientific settings [3,4], limiting the number of samples tested thus far. DRT is slowly catching up to the routine need in Turkey. With international cooperation, Turkey is also strongly involved in scientific HIV/AIDS projects [4]. The diagnostics, treatment and healthcare of HIV patients are covered by various health insurance systems. The progressive increase in the number of registered HIV/AIDS cases in recent years correlates with increased screening and shows an increased awareness of HIV/AIDS in Turkey. However, the official number of cases is still suspected to be underestimated due to the low numbers of voluntary counseling testing centers nationwide. HIV/AIDS cases were identified in all provinces of Turkey, with the greatest percentage of cases (33%) found in Istanbul, followed by cities such as Ankara, Izmir and Antalya [5]. Turkey has experienced a significant population shift in the past few decades, which can be attributed to the massive departure of people from the rural areas of central, eastern and southeastern regions of Anatolia. This urbanization has caused changes in social and cultural values, leading to a change from a more patriarchal society to more liberal one. Liberal social norms have thus led to significant differences between the sexual lifestyles of people from rural and urban areas. Despite progress in the awareness of HIV/AIDS, an HIV-positive test or AIDS diagnosis still creates panic in a Muslim society. Therefore, many people still avoid HIV/AIDS tests in Turkey, or if they test positive, they prefer to keep the results secret, fearing discrimination. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Posi-

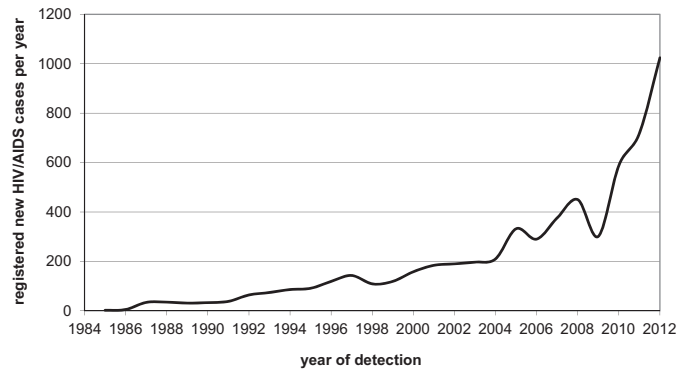


Figure 1 Number of registered new HIV/AIDS cases per year according to data of the MoH.

tif Living Association, are the most active groups working toward increasing awareness of HIV/AIDS in Turkey. They provide education programs on HIV prevention that are also supported by governmental funding.

Conflicts of interest

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