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HIV Communications Project in Pakistan Updates and Future Directions!

Background: April 2019 changed the HIV disease landscape in Pakistan when more than 750 people, mostly children, were diagnosed with HIV in Larkana, Pakistan. This incidence changed the perception of HIV disease limited from the Key populations to an emerging disease in general population. Investigations revealed different suspected contaminated blood sources including reuse of syringes, contaminated donated blood etc.

Project Design: The HIV Communications Project is a quick response to this developing healthcare emergency in rural Pakistan and is designed by the project team with experts from Brown University, Jinnah Sindh Medical University Alumni Association of North America (JSMUAANA), and APPNA Institute of Public Health (AIPH). This is a volunteer project with the goals of disseminating HIV knowledge at different forums including teaching institutions, hospitals, hospital administrations, and other health care provider groups in Pakistan. The main objective is to empower the healthcare providers with HIV knowledge to reduce stigma and increase awareness about HIV/AIDS in Pakistan. The project has the following aims:

Aim1: Create an educational campaign to reduce stigma and increase awareness about HIV/AIDS by empowering healthcare professionals, patients, and their families: Aim-1 of the project consisted of a series of six webinars designed to reduce stigma and increase awareness about HIV among healthcare providers by: providing latest HIV information including guidance on prevention and treatment of HIV in adults, pregnant women, and children. provide latest knowledge from experts in the field about HIV including co-infections with TB, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. We also provided discussion on psychological and socio-economic effects of HIV, and cultural boundaries in Pakistan. This aim of our project is successfully achieved as we have delivered all six webinars as promised between May 19th, 2019 to June 23rd, 2019. All webinars were highly attended, and many clinical/social issues were discussed. As a results, many local healthcare providers, physicians, and medical school faculty members started providing talks in their own communities to increase awareness about the disease.

Aim 2: Help develop and enhance the existing HIV care infrastructure in the affected areas: we aim to support the local healthcare infrastructure by providing more clinical knowledge and support, including supporting laboratory (in Larkana district) personnel with modern techniques and scientific knowledge. We also aim to enhance their HIV management capacity by training lab technicians and laboratorians with interpretations of the lab results. This will include securing funding from different sources.

Aim3-a: Work with local medical schools to train new generations of healthcare providers on how to manage the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Pakistan: We aim to support local medical schools in Pakistan to develop HIV, HIV-TB, HIV-Hepatitis C, and HIV-Hepatitis B modules in

their curriculum or develop Continuing Medical Education (CME) courses through seminars, webinars, and other collaborations. Provide them with learning resources and develop online tools to certify themselves as HIV management clinician and laboratorian. Once develop as a test project in small town in Larkana this can be replicated at other healthcare institute in Pakistan and other third world developing countries.

3-b: Work with colleges and intermediate educational institutions to include more HIV awareness and prevention module in their curriculum. We will provide guidance to interested private school systems to create HIV (with or without coinfections disease) awareness modules in their curricula. We aim to work with the administration and academic faculties of these school system to create these modules.

Aim 4: Work with local institutes and government to provide guidance in HIV treatment including co-infection which is prevalent in this population and help secure resources as needed.

Conclusion: The mentioned project is aimed to help fight the HIV disease epidemic and empower local healthcare communities with necessary knowledge and resources to successfully manage HIV disease in Pakistan in short-term as well as long-term.

Team Members:

1. Fizza S. Gillani, PhD; Providence/Boston Center for AIDS Research, Brown University Department of Internal Medicine, The Miriam Hospital, RI, USA
2. Rizwan Naeem, MD; Montefiore Medical Center NY, New York, USA, Jinnah Sindh Medical University Alumni of North America (JSMUAANA).
3. Aziz Soomro, MD; Westchester Medical Center Valhalla, New York, USA
4. Farooq Soomro, MD; Chandka Medical College, Larkana, Pakistan
5. Syed Iftikhar Hussain, MD, NRI Medical Services, RI, USA
6. Irfan Suleman, MD, John Hopkins University School of Medicine; President, JSMUAANA.

Institutions:

1. Providence-Boston Center for AIDS Research, Brown University, Rhode Island, USA
2. Jinnah Sindh Medical University (JSMU)
3. Jinnah Sindh Medical University Alumni Association of North America
4. APPNA Institute of Public Health (AIPH)

Team Members Traveling to Pakistan in July 2019:

1. Fizza S. Gillani, PhD
2. Timothy P. Flanigan, MD (HIV Expert - Special Guest)
3. Aziz Soomro, MD
4. Rizwan Naeem, MD
5. Isra Hussain, BSc (Team reporter)